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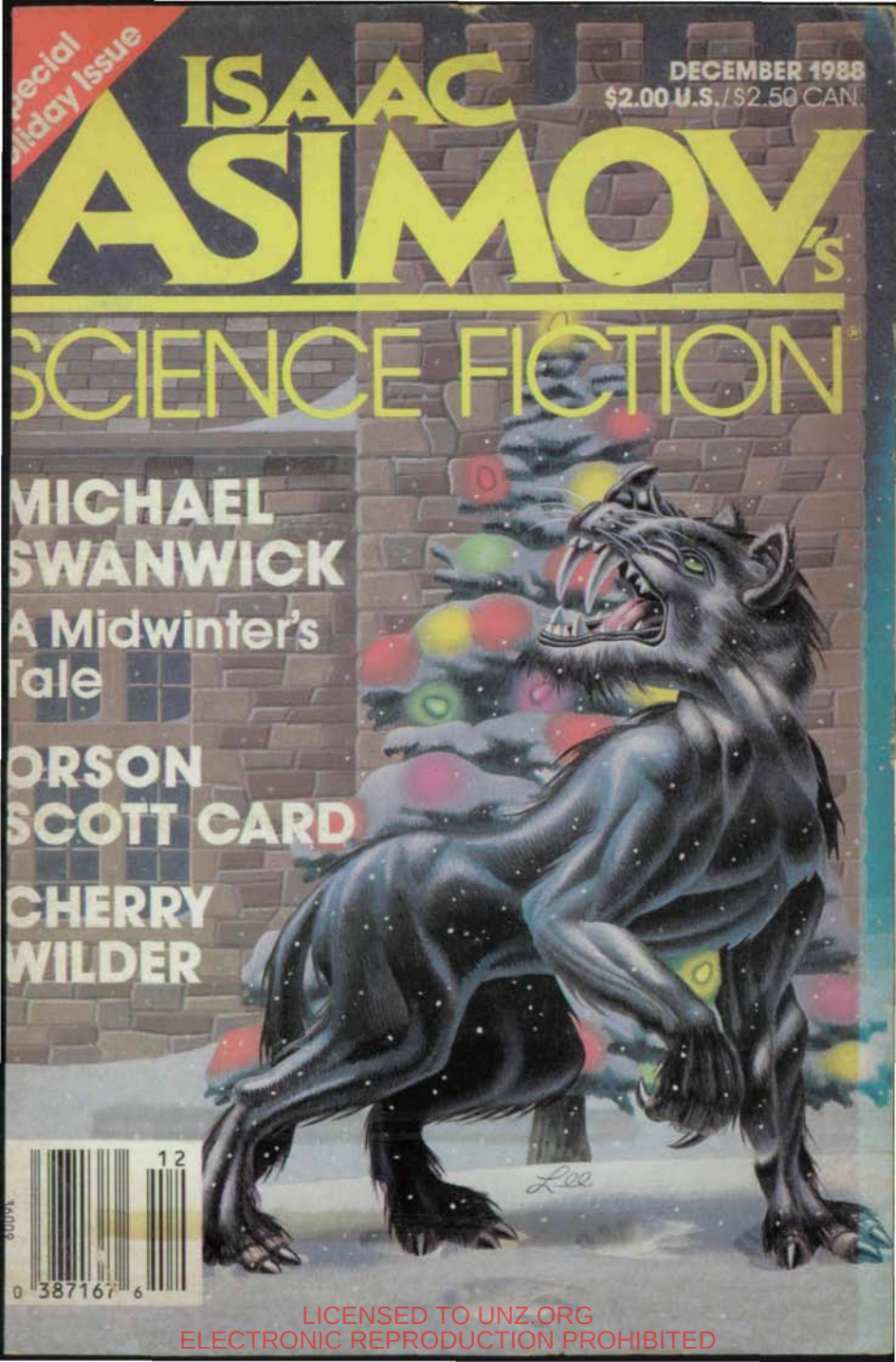

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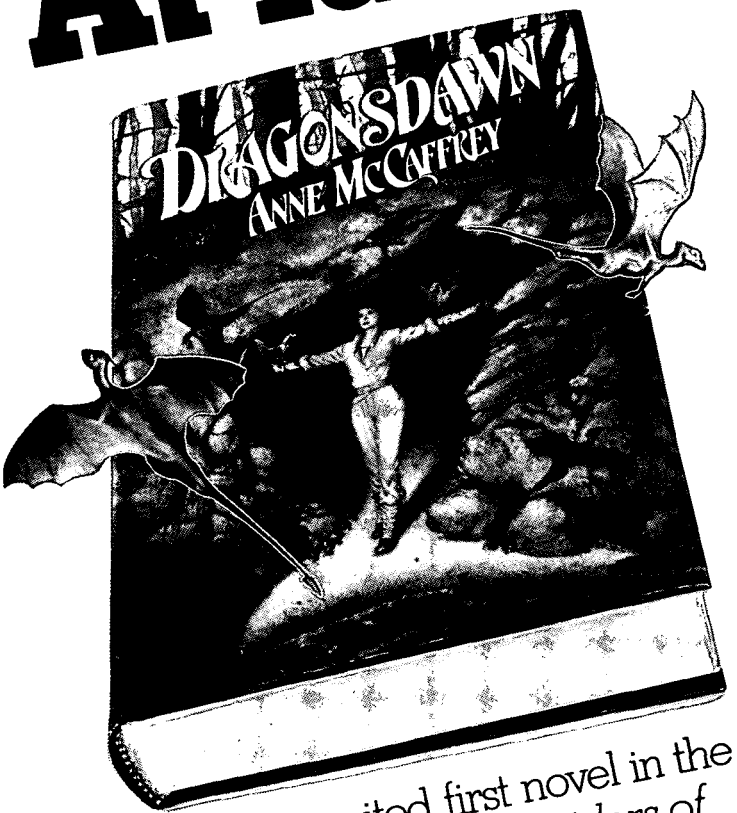

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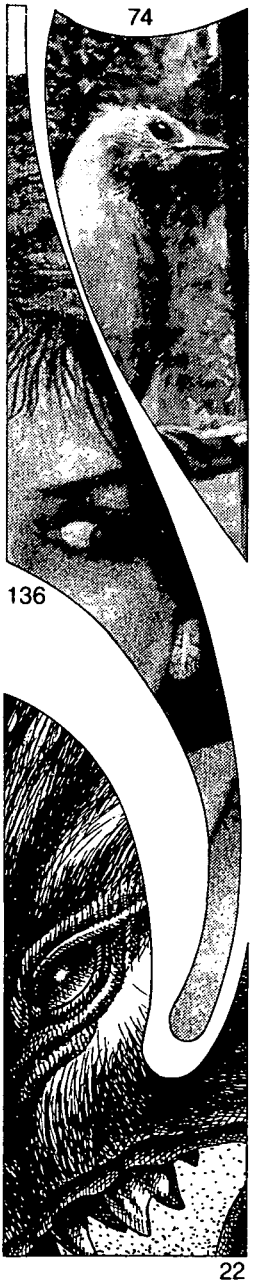

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EDITORIAL

CONTEMPORARIES

by Isaac Asimov

On May 2, 1987, when the Science Fiction Writers Association was forbearing enough to vote me in as the eighth Grand Master, I pointed out, rather jubilantly, that although twelve years had passed since the first Grand Master, not one had yet died. This, I thought, was very pleasant for, almost by definition, no one is a Grand Master until he is just a thought—well, superannuated. It takes time to qualify, after all.

Still, it's a game that in the long run cannot be won. Survival indefinitely is not possible: at least, it has never yet (as far as we know) come to pass.

Not long after I was honored, for instance, the SFWA decided that the ninth Grand Master ought to be announced at the awards dinner in 1988 and that the recipient ought to be Alfred Bester. It was a good choice, for his first story, "The Broken Axiom" had been published in the April 1939 *Thrilling Wonder Stories,* and he had been writing ever since.

He was not as prolific as some of the Grand Masters had been, but prolificity is not an absolute requirement (though it helps). He published such early classics as "Adam and No Eve," and "Fondly Fahrenheit" and a great fantasy novella, "Hell is Forever."

He also wrote two of the all-time classic novels. *The Demolished Man,* which appeared in 1953, was the first novel to win a Hugo, and how well-deserved that was. It was, with scarcely any argument, I imagine, the best novel about a telepathic society ever written. *The Stars My Destination,* published three years later, was even more flamboyant and scarcely lagged in quality.

And, just to mention something that only another writer can truly appreciate, he never received a rejection.

At the time the Grand Master decision was made, however, he was in poor and declining health, so he was told that the honor would be his, just in case. It was a good and kind-hearted move, for Alfie died on September 30, 1987 at the age of seventy-three, and he had to be given the award posthumously.

But that was clearly a special case. The first eight Grand Masters *still* survived.

The third Grand Master, how-

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ever, had been Clifford Donald Simak, who had received the award on April 30, 1977. His first story was "The World of the Red Sun" in the December 1931 *Wonder Stories*. He wrote five stories in the early 1930s, then left the field only to return when John Campbell became editor of *Astounding*. His first story for Campbell was "Rule 18" in the July 1938 issue. He was one of the few pre-Campbell writers who, like Jack Williamson and E.E. Smith, could make the transition to Campbell with ease.

Through his long life, Cliff turned out many novels. Perhaps his most famous work was *City,* built up out of some of his early stories. It was published in 1952 and won the International Fantasy Award. He won a number of Hugos—one for his novella "The Big Front Yard" in 1959, and one for his novel *Way Station,* published in 1963 and the winner of a Hugo in 1964.

Cliff was a totally non-controversial guy. Everyone loved him, with good reason, for he was kind and thoughtful to an incredible degree. When I (as an eighteen-year-old worthless kid) wrote a letter to Campbell denouncing "Rule 18," Cliff sent me a gentle letter, inquiring as to the particulars of my dislike "so that I can improve." I re-read the story, found out I was totally mistaken, admitted that to him in a shame-faced manner. Since receiving that letter on September 1, 1938, we remained correspondence friends for half a century.

But on April 25, 1988, Clifford

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D. Simak died at the age of eighty-three.

The very first Grand Master was named on April 26, 1975, and, to no one's surprise, it was Robert Anson Heinlein. While I was not involved in the decision, I cannot believe there was any opposition, or even any hesitation. There was no doubt at all that he was the greatest living science fiction writer at that time, and the award was as inevitable as voting in George Washington as first President of the United States.

In fact, there was never any doubt of Bob's pre-eminence from the moment his first story, "Lifeline," appeared in the August 1939 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*. I immediately wrote a letter to Campbell praising it and doing the same for subsequent Heinlein stories. By 1942, in fact, it was clear that all science fiction authors could be divided into two groups: 1) Heinlein, and 2) everybody else.

By then, you see, he had published "—And He Built a Crooked House," "Blowups Happen," "Coventry," "If This Goes On," "Logic of Empire," "Methuselah's Children," "The Roads Must Rolls," "They," "Universe," and others. As if that were not enough, he had also published, under the pseudonym of Anson MacDonald, "By His Bootstraps" and "Solution Unsatisfactory."

He didn't write during World War II, when he was working at the Naval Air Experimental Station (along with L. Sprague de Camp and me) but after the war he resumed his winning ways. In 1946, he scored an enormous first for those of us who wrote science fiction for the pulp magazines. He sold "The Green Hills of Earth" to the *Saturday Evening Post*, the slickest "slick" of them all. It was an early example of the new respect that science fiction was to gain, and Heinlein had broken ground for all of us.

In 1950, Heinlein pioneered again. He worked on *Destination: Moon*, the first motion picture to be filmed in the true spirit of magazine science fiction.

He began to concentrate on novels, and, with *Stranger in a Strange Land*, published in 1961, he made the big time. It was the first novel by one of us that became a cult classic and paved the way for the fairly large number of magazine science fiction writers who would, thereafter, write novels that made it into the august list of bestsellers recorded by the New York *Times*. He won many Hugos, of course, including one in 1956 for his novel *Double Star*, which I think was his best.

Heinlein was not above a practical joke. I met him first at Campbell's house on March 11, 1942. I refused drinks and it quickly turned out that I had never touched alcohol. He therefore offered me what he said was a Coca Cola. I said, doubtfully, "It smells funny." He insisted it was a Coca Cola, how-

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ever, so I chug-a-lugged it as I would a Coke.

Except that it was a Cuba libre and that was when I found out that it was a lucky thing I didn't drink because my metabolism won't take alcohol and one drink gets me drunk. Within five minutes I was drunk, but didn't know it. All I knew was that I felt funny, so I sat down, very upset, to wait until the odd symptoms vanished (if ever). I had been my ebullient self up to that point, so Heinlein laughed heartily and said, "No wonder he doesn't drink. It sobers him up."

On May 8, 1988, alas, Robert Heinlein died at the age of eighty.

In the space of just over half a year, then, three Grand Masters had departed from us, and now the total number of living Grand Masters is six.

In a way, we shouldn't complain. All three of them had lived their three score years and ten, and two of them had attained the fourscore mark. Simak and Heinlein, at least, had written steadily for half a century, and turned out a sterling collection of first-rate work. And if Bester spent too much of his time on comic books, on radio scripts, on travel magazines, and such like beyond the pale activities, what he did do for science fiction was head and shoulders above almost anyone, and did not significantly pale even when compared with the best.

Still, they're gone, and I cannot fail to note that they were my contemporaries. Simak began his significant work a year before I did; Bester and Heinlein a few months *after* I did. We were all new in the field together.

This sort of thing makes one feel one's mortality.

However, it is only the body that is short-lived and evanescent. The creative work of the mind is longer-lived. Nor is it only the writing of these authors that lives on; younger authors grew up under their influence.

Once I had studied Simak's "Rule 18" carefully, I realized that what had thrown me at first was his making use of separate scenes without any dull, plot-slowing transitions between—something I wasn't used to. Noting its effectiveness, I at once began to make use of the technique myself and modeled myself on his spare, clear style as closely as I could. I also tried to learn from Heinlein and Bester, who were clearly my masters in the early days.

While I live and write, then, something of them lives also, and I trust that when I go to my own reward (whatever that may turn out to be) there will be some good younger writers, still writing furiously, who will try a few Asimovian tricks of the trade now and then and, in them, some of me will remain alive, too. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov and Company:

I was looking over the magazine rack at the local mall bookstore when I noticed the cover to your December 1987 holiday issue. I had been a subscriber to your magazine years back but had lost interest in science fiction except for an occasional *Star Trek* novel. For me, science fiction had become shut in a hard metallic casing with admission inside only through long-term devotion to a certain writer's eight volume saga about some far flung planetary struggle. If you missed book six, sorry, you're lost. I may be in the minority, but I like my science fiction as I do my toast—light.

That's why I was so pleased with your holiday issue. The Christmas touch in some of the stories made it perfect holiday reading and I devoured each story with the same pleasure as my wife's Christmas cookies. Starting with Jack McDevitt's "To Hell With The Stars," it was a pleasure to see the names I'd grown up with—Vance, Sturgeon, Asimov, and, for me, the most magical name of all, Bradbury. All the stories were like old friends, and they were asking "Where have you been?"

I'm sorry. I've been away. But I will be back soon. Thanks for reawakening that love of science fiction within me. I do hope that far inside me is still a little boy, like the one on your cover, who holds the dreams of others close to him, and gazes up at the stars, creating worlds of his own.

Thanks again!

Tom Martin
B24 A22 Valley View
Watervliet, NY 12189

Science fiction comes in all varieties. If there is a variety you don't like, you can exclude it and still have plenty of other stuff to read. Remember that.

—Isaac Asimov

Good Doctor:

Thank you for your excellent magazine, your lifelong contribution to science fiction and to all other fields of human endeavor.

It pained me to see a thoughtful and relentless intellect such as your own subjected to the blinders of censorship. An individual's viewpoint, if well stated, well thought out, and relevant to the publication, deserves the honor of print. A publication opposed to a particular viewpoint can and should provide space for rebuttal. The letters section is well suited for this purpose.

I (along with many other read-

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ers) would like to read your article on genetic counseling in its entirety. There is little doubt that many people would be forced to reexamine their position on issues such as abortion and euthanasia if they had to deal with it as a personal problem rather than a sociological one.

It's easy to say "save the child" when it's someone else's problem. Not so easy when it's your child and your problem. Should my child who could be a living thinking being be destroyed because of a physical defect? He/she could encumber our lives, should we let them?

Should we preserve a person's short life or destroy them at an earlier age to save them the torment of living? We like a clean healthy society. We shun the unfortunate and the misshapen. Harlan Ellison's short story "The Discarded" in his "Paingod" collection tells of a society which will no longer tolerate deformities. It seems we are closer than ever to Ellison's nightmare future.

Thank you again for your excellent magazine and for your provocative editorials. Life would not be the same without you.

Douglas Van Fleet
Willard, OH

Oh, don't worry. The essence of the article was quoted in the editorial, so it has no longer been censored.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I've just finished reading your editorial, "Academe," in the mid-Dec. '87 issue of *IAsfm*. Bravo! At last, an important writer with a *sane* viewpoint on the subject of literature.

Personally, I find myself extremely puzzled by the so-called "literati" of today. Their attitude seems to be one of "If it's interesting, entertaining, well written, and thought-provoking, then it can't be literature!" My puzzlement deepened when I took out a subscription to the quarterly British literary journal, *Jennings Magazine:* I found the stories in *Jennings* obscure, boring, meaningless, and, in some instances, not very well written.

Having had several stories (of the traditional kind) rejected by *Jennings*, I decided to write one especially for them. Not as a potential saleable piece, but as an insult.

I wrote the story ("Koan") in *avant-garde* style, liberally sprinking it with staccato phrases and obscurities. It was my own version of a "two-fingered farewell" to *Jennings*.

They bought it.

After I'd recovered from my shock, I realized that I'd proved my point: when aiming work at "literary" markets, *obscurity pays!* (To be fair, I should mention that *Jennings* now publishes a reasonable balance of *avant-garde*/mainstream fiction. The Summer '87 issue, in which my story appeared, featured the winning stories in the *Jennings* Science Fiction competition—there was some good stuff amongst the three prize-winning stories.)

Returning to your editorial, "Academe"; I note that you agreed with the quote from James Gunn, i.e., " . . . most great literature has

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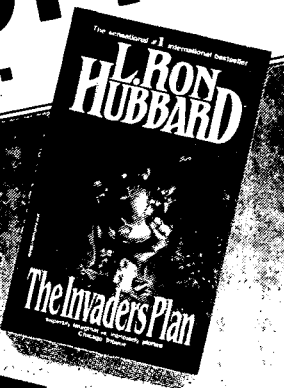

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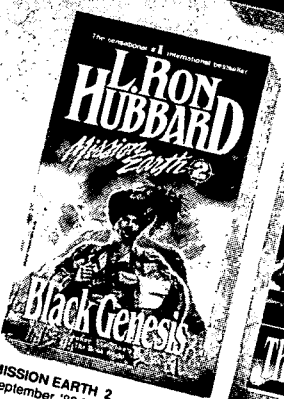

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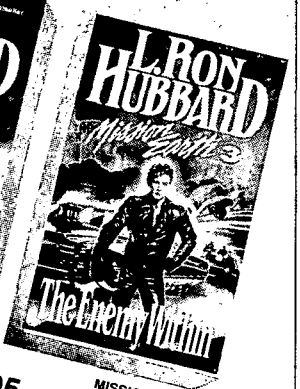

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been commercial and even formulaic, from *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, through the Greek drama, Shakespeare, and the English novel, up to relatively recent times."

In actual fact, though, Shakespeare can hardly be described as a man who wrote to a formula. His fame rests partly on the fact that he *ignored* the traditional, classical formula which was generally based on the Greek rules of the drama. Renaissance critics decried the works of Shakespeare for that very reason (and, believe it or not, there are present-day dinosaurs who maintain the opinion of their short-sighted Renaissance predecessors). So, whilst Shakespeare was certainly a *commercial* writer, we can never describe his work as formulaic.

Before leaving, I'd just like to make a personal plea for *shorter* stories. There are very few stories on the market which couldn't be improved by pruning, and this would make more room for other stories. I look back with fond nostalgia on those days when *IAsfm* published ten or more stories per issue. Also, I'm not keen on serializations.

Those niggles apart, keep up the good work with *IAsfm,* and may you all continue to prosper.

Yours sincerely,

Philip J. Backers.
Walney Isle
Barrow-in-Furness
Cumbria
England

I think you don't mean Renaissance critics, but Restoration critics, and Augustan (eighteenth century) critics. Heck, Dryden wrote Antony and Cleopatra *to preserve the classic "unities" and called it* All For Love. *The only reason we know of Dryden's effort today is because it makes* Antony and Cleopatra *look so good.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Crew,
And Particularly the (Thought-) Provoking Doctor:

I have gotten no further than page 16 of your February issue, and find myself compelled to write. You have plenty of work to do to bring me more good stuff to read, so I'll be brief: I have one commendation, one quibble, and one correction to make.

First, Doctor Asimov's second editorial on censoring. Bravo! Let me add that, in my experience, thinking people (the kind one would expect to find reading *IAsfm*) generally concur with his viewpoint. Censorship results in (indeed, has as one of its primary goals) the suppression of ideas. This is offensive, even in principle: ideas don't hurt people; people hurt people. I am sure there are those whose well-being is threatened by the free expression of ideas, but this is usually due to immaturity or an artificially circumscribed perspective. In the case of children, the measured introduction of new ideas at a healthful pace is the responsibility of the parent; for the others—let them heed the fashionable "may not be suitable for all" labels. It is an individual responsibility; not a decision to be handed down by some self-appointed committee.

Second, in reference to the admirable letter from Walter Yergen.

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I think the good Doctor should accept the adjective "venerable." To "venerate" is to respect, and there is much to respect. Alas, the dictionary weakens my point, for it makes clear that one of the primary connotations of the adjectival form is "respect due to age."

Last, "Arizona" absolutely, positively does NOT come from "arida zona" or even "zona arida," although this is a plausible hypothesis. Neither does it mean "dry belt." Although it reaches the English language from North American Spanish, it is originally from the Papago language (a N. American Indian tribe), "arizonac," or, "little springs." Was the Doctor testing us, or did he neglect to do his research?

I'll let you return to your very important work now.

Sincerely,

Lyle Wiedeman
Santa Ana, CA

It seems to me, from what little I know about Arizona, that if "arida zona" isn't the source of the name, then it should be. You may be right on the Indian derivation, but I've never heard it before.

—Isaac Asimov

Gentlemen:

Your February editorial concerning judgment as well as censorship prompts me to write. Unfortunately, I am acquiring a collection of "Thanks, but no thanks" letters from Mr. Dozois which, if I may paraphrase, say "Maybe your story is not new, maybe you don't write too good, or maybe the story just stinks." I understand that with the 850 manuscripts you say you receive each month, time does not permit a personal reply.

What's an aspiring writer to do? My teachers and friends all like my stories. Only your editor doesn't. Feedback is needed. Should I resubmit hoping for an editor with better judgment? Hire a critical editor? Find an agent?

Could you not rewrite your letter in such a way that an editor could put a check mark next to something closely resembling why the story was rejected? I estimate it would take five seconds longer to check what the problem with the manuscript was prior to stuffing it into the SASE. With 850 submissions and five seconds each, that would be a little over an hour and ten minutes additional work for all your editors. Dividing by the total number of editors, that would probably be only minutes more per month each. Could you not afford that time?

I'm sure the approximately 845 persons who receive "Thanks, but no thanks" letters each month would be grateful. We may even learn how to write better. With that help, we may eventually receive something that does not start "Thanks, but . . . "

Sincerely,

Ann Charon
Reston, VA

Come, come, surely you want a useful criticism. To check off a comment like: "Sounds amateurish," or "Old plot," or simply "Stinks," isn't going to be helpful. A form letter means you've gotten nowhere near. If you did *get somewhere near, you*

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would get a long letter of analysis and suggestions for revision. As for your teachers and friends, they don't count, I am sorry to say. Their jobs don't hang on their judgment, so they can afford to be "nice."

—Isaac Asimov

Isaac, Isaac, Isaac!*

In your response to Holly Lewis (February 1988 issue) you make the statement "A bowstring that is always kept taut eventually loses its spring." A bow propels an arrow using the "spring" of the wood or other material in the arms of the bow; the string has virtually no elasticity (some cheap children's bows excepted). Such a basic mistake from one such as yourself!

What a strange thing to finally provoke me to write! The magazine is tremendous; and please keep your editorials as wide-ranging as they have been—I find them fascinating and thought-provoking.

Karl Sovik
Xenia, OH

*While I disapprove of uninvited familiarity, "Dr. Asimov, Dr. Asimov, Dr. Asimov" just doesn't have the right ring—sorry!

There you are; you have uncovered my secret. I have never used a bow, or even held one. Now that you explain it, you sound right.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov and Mr. Dozois;

This is my first ever letter to any of the four speculative fiction publications that are available here in South Carolina. As a transplanted northerner, I wanted to briefly say thank you for the excellent stories in the February 1988 issue. Especially enjoyable were "Trapping Run" by Harry Turtledove and "Songs from a Far Country" by Bruce McAllister. Turtledove recently appeared in another of the "speculative fiction magazines" I read and that story was equally enjoyable.

I want to mention my father briefly for he is in his late fifties and has been a big part of the reason I read as much speculative fiction as I do. Stephen King, Peter Straub, and Elmore Leonard are others of my "required reading list," but I've read Arthur C. Clarke, Ellison, Heinlein, Silverberg, Budrys, and the unsinkable Dr. Asimov himself for years beyond count. (I hope I didn't make you feel old, you're young in spirit if nothing else.)

I miss the editorship of Shawna, but Gardner Dozois is doing such a high-quality job, I can only wish that Shawna is doing half as well at whatever pursuit she is pursuing (?) . . . Suffice it to say, each editor has his or her own "flavor" and this one is fine.

Also, Dr. Asimov, might I prevail upon yourself to show a picture of your lovely daughter Robyn. You mention her from time to time in various articles you've written in both this magazine and the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and I am curious as to what she looks like. Not to mention a slight crush at the way you've described her to be.

Also, on a more serious note, I thought your editorial about suicide and the untimely death of

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*Arthur C. Clarke

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"James Tiptree, Jr." to be both thoughtful and timely. If we look back to the beginning of this century when such apparatus were unavailable, the dying were allowed to die. It's that simple and that easy. If given the option of a quick merciful death or some semiconscious form of "half-life" where a machine substitutes where a human organ might otherwise, the choice is almost absurd.

Again the magazine tends to be a whole lot more than just cute little fiction stories . . . it deals with me and what I face, maybe it doesn't slap you in the face with morals and judgments and so on, but it does involve your thought processes far more than "well I guess I'll watch the Cosby show tonight . . . "

Thanks again for your time,

Bruce Burtner
Irmo, SC

Alas, I think you will have to take my word for it where Robyn is concerned. I can't use the magazine for family aggrandizement. Besides, Robyn might object, even though she inherits my own capacity for cheerful self-appreciation.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

For one who appreciates your apparent intelligence and quick wit, I was horrified at the lack of sensitivity in your reply to Andrew D. Hardings' letter in the January issue of this magazine, concerning the Vietnam Memorial. Your comments were split into two parts, so I will do the same with my response.

a) I feel that anyone who would go to all the trouble of searching for a particular name—probably someone who lost a loved one in the conflict—is highly unlikely to ever forget the significance of the memorial.

b) The memorial is not there to remind us of political short-sightedness. It is there to remind us of all the people who gave the greatest sacrifice of all for their country. These people responded to a call from their country, and died for their country. The political background to the conflict is completely irrelevant. In looking at the memorial we should not be analyzing the reasons for their death. It is enough that they responded to the call of the government that they elected.

I found your statement unsuitable and insulting to all those people who died, and to those who came back alive. You have cheapened their sacrifice, and I urge you to issue an apology.

Yours truly,

Mary Silcox
Mississauga, Ontario
Canada

PS: I have seen the Vietnam Memorial, and the combined effect of the memorial itself and the reactions of the people around me were enough to drive me to tears. And I'm not even an American. To have this effect, it must be suitable as a memorial. It was not built as a "public relations ploy."

I know I sound insensitive, because for thousands of years we've been fed this business of dying for our country. But didn't the Ger-

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mans die for their country and didn't the Japanese die for their country, and aren't the Soviets in Afghanistan answering their country's call? On that basis, everything *is noble. I wish there were some way we would stop dying for our own little segments of the Earth and start living for humanity. I think that must be harder, or we would do it.*

—Isaac Asimov

Gentlemen:

During the month of January 1988, I've been in the throes of the obsession of the writing of my first novel.

Things went well—if "going well" can be a description of forgetting to eat, leaving bills unpaid and eighteen-hour writing stints ending in exhaustion—until the last chapter, when I realized I had no decent ending and didn't know where to go.

I needed time off, to let things settle and get the creative juices working, so I read the recent serialization of Harlan Ellison's *I, Robot: The Movie*.

That's where my reading of *IAsfm* had last left off. I'd felt certain that reading a screenplay would be difficult or tedious. I was wrong, though. I couldn't put the thing down, and read it through with hardly an interruption.

Bravissimo to all concerned.

It's now just past 4 PM on the penultimate day of January. Maybe, after this letter, I can settle down to my own work.

Thank you, thank you.

Kenneth H. Fleischer
Los Angeles, CA

Just a hint. It's my experience that it is dangerous writing a story of any kind unless you know the ending to begin with. You can make up the middle as you go along, but you have to know where you're heading.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Doctor and Family,

After reading the current "On Books" (March 1988), I decided that I had to toss yet another element into the ongoing Spinrad vs. Society controversy—conditional kudos. This was one of the most thoughtful and intelligently presented treatments of the "hard SF" question that I have seen, and certainly the best by Mr. Spinrad. It seems that I was a bit hasty in placing the man into my "obnoxious SOB" pigeonhole. Not that he can't be, you understand. He most definitely can, and does, behave in this manner (in print, at least), but he has here proven that he is capable of rising above it.

Not that I deny Mr. Spinrad the right to write what and how he chooses—I merely question whether this is really the way to communicate most effectively. Moving on to other matters, I will note in passing that I believe Spinrad's views on Ursula LeGuin to be bullshit (are you listening, Norman? Yes, mother.). Just for the record.

Dipping now into another controversy . . . the envelope, please. What on God's green Earth (talk about a dated phrase) is wrong with sex?? Or "dangerous" ideas? Isn't that (the latter) what SF is supposed to be all about? I'm sorry if some people are offended by spec-

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ulation on the nature of religion, or the origin of man, or possible permutations in the social order, or whatever has gotten their wind up this time, but I cannot accept that a magazine such as this, devoted to science fiction and (above all) good writing, is the place for any kind of censorship of ideas. You have held out this long—Please don't start now.

I have been an avid science fiction reader since age eight, and in those years I have had my horizons expanded more times than I can count. And I am thankful for each and every one. It hasn't always been painless, and never has it been easy, but then that's what life is all about. If we do not continue to grow and mature, we stagnate and eventually fall into decay. This is mental maturation I am speaking of, and it had, by God, better continue happening until the day we die. Once we say to ourselves, "Okay, self, all your ideas are in good working order, life has nothing more to show you, so sit back and be smugly secure in the knowledge that you are right," why then we might as well pick a lily and lie down, because it's all over.

Not that we should be ready to throw away a perfectly good opinion at the drop of a hat, mind . . . discernment is the key here, and the learned ability to decide rationally whether or not any given idea is closer to the Truth than any other. Which sounds awfully familiar, doesn't it, to those of us who have read the Good Doctor's editorials. I'm not sure just when I came to this conviction, but I have long suspected that the Doctor had a hand in it somewhere.

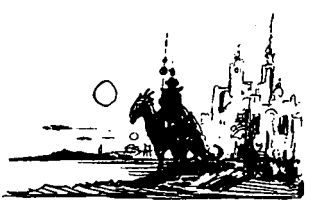
Whew! Once I made the decision to write, I found I had more to say than I thought. Thanks for listening.

Spatially yours,

Erik M. Dutton
Charlotte, NC

"Dangerous ideas" are dangerous because they upset (or tend to upset) entrenched beliefs, and nobody likes that. Even you and I don't like it. If I were to come up against credible observations and logical argument to the effect that ghosts do, too, exist, or that astrology is valid, I would be plenty upset. If I had to accept such views I would—but not happily. In any case, we're not planning to censor.

—Isaac Asimov



ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Connie Willis's novel, *Lincoln's Dreams* (Bantam Books), recently won the 1987 John W. Campbell Memorial Award for best science fiction novel, while Pat Murphy's novelette, "Rachel in Love" (*IAsfm*, April 1987), won the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award for best science fiction short story. The winners of both awards were announced in July at the University of Kansas as part of its annual day-long Campbell Conference.

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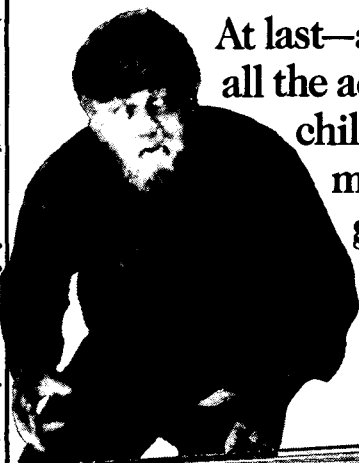
© Universal Pictures, Courtesy of MCA Publishing Rights. Lon Chaney, Jr., in *The Wolfman* (1940).



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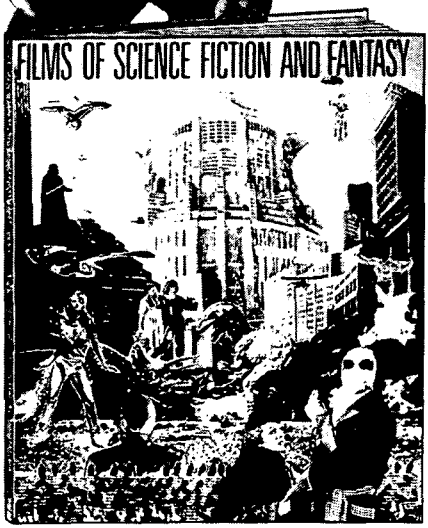

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GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

If I were to offer you, right now, a little something called *The Universal Military Simulator*... snakily sliding up to you as if offering bogus Rolexes . . . you might think you were in some dimly remembered "Twilight Zone" episode ("Oh, yeah, I know that one . . . where this guy finds a gray metallic box . . . "). Or perhaps it's from some Ray Bradbury story (a missing gem from *Dark Carnival*).

Well, while I can't say that every home should have one, I can, in fact, suggest that, yes, *The Universal Military Simulator* is here, and it's a damned interesting gizmo.

Actually, the *UMS* (Rainbird Software U.K., published in the U.S. by Firebird Licensees Inc., PO Box 49, Ramsey, NJ 07446) is a remarkable computer game that is to warfare what a flight simulator program is to flying.

The program, designed by D. Ezra Sidran, lets you recreate battles ranging from the classic confrontations of Ancient History to high-tech land-based combat of the future. The package comes with the program and scenario disc, a hefty user manual, a scenario booklet covering five key confrontations, and a map of the battle of Gettysburg.

The User Manual, in typical Rainbird fashion, isn't overly friendly, but, with a bit of perseverance, you can find yourself quickly getting started playing with the Main Menu. Here's where you'll decide whether to Edit or Create a Simulation, Design a Map or Design an Army. Five different periods are offered for immediate play . . . the battle of Arbela (331 B.C.) between Alexander the Great and Darius of Persia, Hastings (1066) where the future of the English throne was decided, Marston Moor (1644) where Oliver Cromwell saved Parliament's army, Waterloo (1815) and Napoleon's personal endgame, and Gettysburg (1863) one of the bloodiest battles of all time. Playing through these five will make it easier to design one's own "dream battle."

The Order of Battle for each army can be accessed, displaying its Strength, Speed, Type, and Efficiency. This information constantly changes as the battle progresses, so it's vital to keep tabs on your forces. Units may also be removed from battle or change the statistics of a selected unit.

But it's the Battlefield Map Win-

(Continued on page 135)

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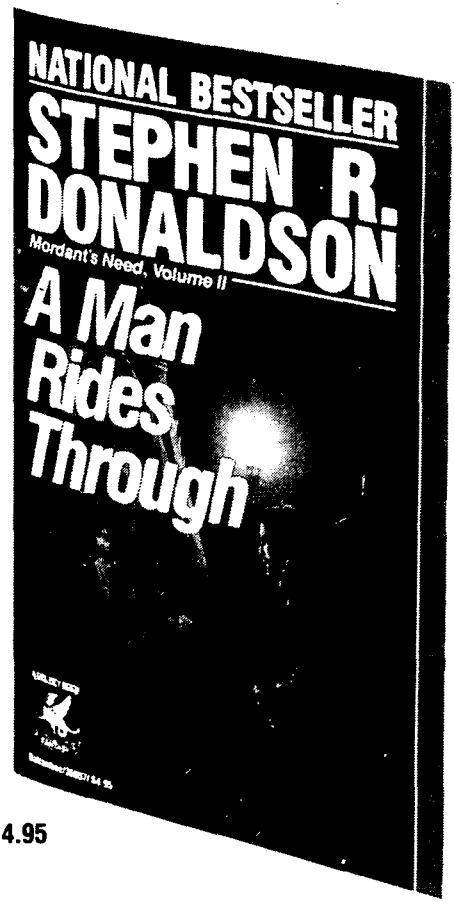

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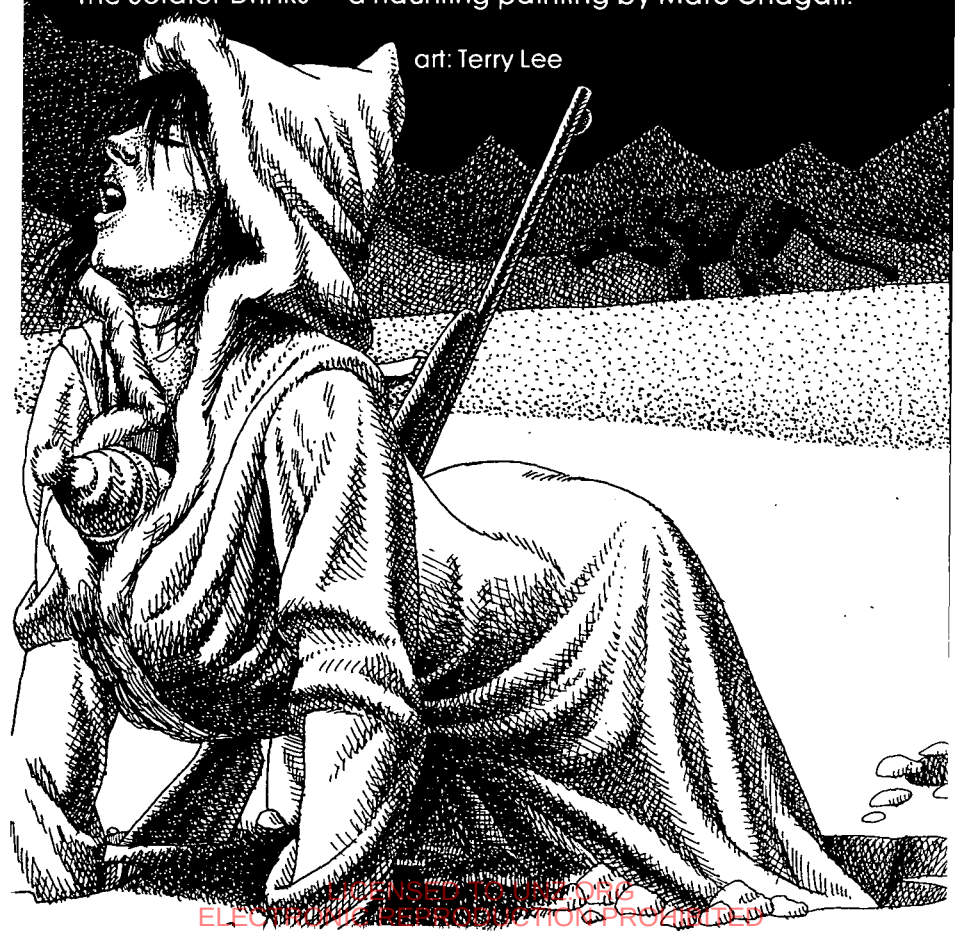
by Michael Swanwick

Every Christmas Eve, the Swanwick family partakes in the curious Victorian custom of spinning Christmas ghost stories. Mr. wanwick tells us that "A Midwinter's Tale" began as his contribution to this eerie tradition, and that the story was partly inspired by "The Soldier Drinks"—a haunting painting by Marc Chagall.

art: Terry Lee



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Maybe I shouldn't tell you about that childhood Christmas Eve in the Stone House, so long ago. My memory is no longer reliable, not since I contracted the brain fever. Soon I'll be strong enough to be reposted offplanet, to some obscure star light years beyond that plangent moon rising over your father's barn, but how much has been burned from my mind! Perhaps none of this actually happened.

Sit on my lap and I'll tell you all. Well then, my knee. No woman was ever ruined by a knee. You laugh, but it's true. Would that it were so easy!

The hell of war as it's now practiced is that its purpose is not so much to gain territory as to deplete the enemy, and thus it's always better to maim than to kill. A corpse can be bagged, burned, and forgotten, but the wounded need special care. Regrowth tanks, false skin, medical personnel, a long convalescent stay on your parents' farm. That's why they will vary their weapons, hit you with obsolete stone axes or toxins or radiation, to force your Command to stock the proper prophylaxes, specialized medicines, obscure skills. Mustard gas is excellent for that purpose, and so was the brain fever.

All those months I lay in the hospital, awash in pain, sometimes hallucinating. Dreaming of ice. When I awoke, weak and not really believing I was alive, parts of my life were gone, randomly burned from my memory. I recall standing at the very top of the iron bridge over the Izveltaya, laughing and throwing my books one by one into the river, while my best friend Fennwolf tried to coax me down. "I'll join the militia! I'll be a soldier!" I shouted hysterically. And so I did. I remember that clearly but just what led up to that preposterous instant is utterly beyond me. Nor can I remember the name of my second-eldest sister, though her face is as plain to me as yours is now. There are odd holes in my memory.

That Christmas Eve is an island of stability in my seachanging memories, as solid in my mind as the Stone House itself, that neolithic cavern in which we led such basic lives that I was never quite sure in which era of history we dwelt. Sometimes the men came in from the hunt, a larl or two pacing ahead content and sleepy-eyed, to lean bloody spears against the walls, and it might be that we lived on Old Earth itself then. Other times, as when they brought in projectors to fill the common room with colored lights, scintillae nesting in the branches of the season's tree, and cool, harmless flames dancing atop the presents, we seemed to belong to a much later age, in some mythologized province of the future.

The house was abustle, the five families all together for this one time of the year, and outlying kin and even a few strangers staying over, so that we had to put bedding in places normally kept closed during the winter, moving furniture into attic lumberrooms, and even at that there

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were cots and thick bolsters set up in the blind ends of hallways. The women scurried through the passages, scattering uncles here and there, now settling one in an armchair and plumping him up like a cushion, now draping one over a table, cocking up a mustachio for effect. A pleasant time.

Coming back from a visit to the kitchens, where a huge woman I did not know, with flour powdering her big-freckled arms up to the elbows, had shooed me away, I surprised Suki and Georg kissing in the nook behind the great hearth. They had their arms about each other and I stood watching them. Suki was smiling, cheeks red and round. She brushed her hair back with one hand so Georg could nuzzle her ear, turning slightly as she did so, and saw me. She gasped and they broke apart, flushed and startled.

Suki gave me a cookie, dark with molasses and a single stingy, crystalized raisin on top, while Georg sulked. Then she pushed me away, and I heard her laugh as she took Georg's hand to lead him away to some darker forest recess of the house.

Father came in, boots all muddy, to sling a brace of game birds down on the hunt cabinet. He set his unstrung bow and quiver of arrows on their pegs, then hooked an elbow atop the cabinet to accept admiration and a hot drink from mother. The larl padded by, quiet and heavy and content. I followed it around a corner, ancient ambitions of riding the beast rising up within. I could see myself, triumphant before my cousins, high atop the black carnivore. "Flip!" my father called sternly. "Leave Samson alone! He is a bold and noble creature, and I will not have you pestering him."

He had eyes in the back of his head, had my father.

Before I could grow angry, my cousins hurried by, on their way to hoist the straw men into the trees out front, and swept me up along with them. Uncle Chittagong, who looked like a lizard and had to stay in a glass tank for reasons of health, winked at me as I skirled past. From the corner of my eye I saw my second-eldest sister beside him, limned in blue fire.

Forgive me. So little of my childhood remains; vast stretches were lost in the blue icefields I wandered in my illness. My past is like a sunken continent with only mountaintops remaining unsubmerged, a scattered archipelago of events from which to guess the shape of what was lost. Those remaining fragments I treasure all the more, and must pass my hands over them periodically to reassure myself that something remains.

So where was I? Ah, yes: I was in the north belltower, my hidey-place in those days, huddled behind Old Blind Pew, the bass of our triad of bells, crying because I had been deemed too young to light one of the yule torches. "Hallo!" cried a voice, and then, "Out here, stupid!" I ran

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to the window, tears forgotten in my astonishment at the sight of my brother Karl silhouetted against the yellowing sky, arms out, treading the roof gables like a tightrope walker.

"You're going to get in trouble for that!" I cried.

"Not if you don't tell!" Knowing full well how I worshipped him. "Come on down! I've emptied out one of the upper kitchen cupboards. We can crawl in from the pantry. There's a space under the door—we'll see everything!"

Karl turned and his legs tangled under him. He fell. Feet first, he slid down the roof.

I screamed. Karl caught the guttering and swung himself into an open window underneath. His sharp face rematerialized in the gloom, grinning. "Race you to the jade ibis!"

He disappeared, and then I was spinning wildly down the spiral stairs, mad to reach the goal first.

It was not my fault we were caught, for I would never have giggled if Karl hadn't been tickling me to see just how long I could keep silent. I was frightened, but not Karl. He threw his head back and laughed until he cried, even as he was being hauled off by three very angry grandmothers, pleased more by his own roguery than by anything he might have seen.

I myself was led away by an indulgent Katrina, who graphically described the caning I was to receive and then contrived to lose me in the crush of bodies in the common room. I hid behind the goat tapestry until I got bored—not long!—and then Chubkin, Kosmonaut, and Pew rang, and the room emptied.

I tagged along, ignored, among the moving legs, like a marsh bird scuttling through waving grasses. Voices clangoring in the east stairway, we climbed to the highest balcony, to watch the solstice dance. I hooked hands over the crumbling balustrade and pulled myself up on tiptoe so I could look down on the procession as it left the house. For a long time nothing happened, and I remember being annoyed at how casually the adults were taking all this, standing about with drinks, not one in ten glancing away from themselves. Pheidre and Valerian (the younger children had been put to bed, complaining, an hour ago) began a game of tag, running through the adults, until they were chastened and ordered with angry shakes of their arms to be still.

Then the door below opened. The women who were witches walked solemnly out, clad in hooded terrycloth robes as if they'd just stepped from the bath. But they were so silent I was struck with fear. It seemed as if something cold had reached into the pink, giggling women I had seen preparing themselves in the kitchen and taken away some warmth

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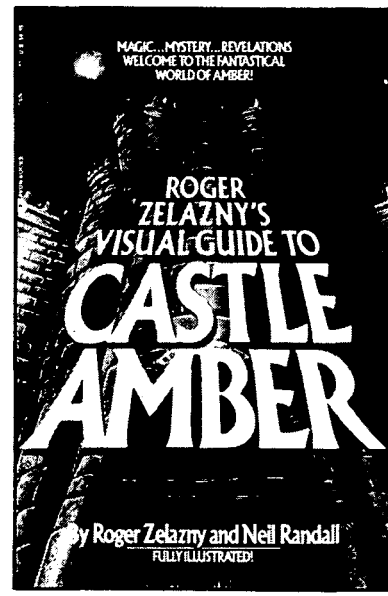

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or laughter from them. "Katrina!" I cried in panic, and she lifted a moon-cold face toward me. Several of the men exploded in laughter, white steam puffing from bearded mouths, and one rubbed his knuckles in my hair. My second-eldest sister drew me away from the balustrade and hissed at me that I was not to cry out to the witches, that this was important, that when I was older I would understand, and in the meantime if I did not behave myself I would be beaten. To soften her words, she offered me a sugar crystal, but I turned away, stern and unappeased.

Single-file the women walked out on the rocks to the east of the house, where all was barren slate swept free of snow by the wind from the sea, and at a great distance—you could not make out their faces—doffed their robes. For a moment they stood motionless in a circle, looking at one another. Then they began the dance, each wearing nothing but a red ribbon tied about one upper thigh, the long end blowing free in the breeze.

As they danced their circular dance, the families watched, largely in silence. Sometimes there was a muffled burst of laughter as one of the younger men muttered a racy comment, but mostly they watched with great respect, even a kind of fear. The gusty sky was dark, and flocked with small clouds like purple-headed rams. It was chilly on the roof and I could not imagine how the women withstood it. They danced faster and faster, and the families grew quieter, packing the edges more tightly, until I was forced away from the railing. Cold and bored, I went downstairs, nobody turning to watch me leave, back to the main room, where a fire still smouldered in the hearth.

The room was stuffy when I'd left, and cooler now. I lay down on my stomach before the fireplace. The flagstones smelled of ashes and were gritty to the touch, staining my fingertips as I trailed them in idle little circles. The stones were cold at the edges, slowly growing warmer, and then suddenly too hot and I had to snatch my hand away. The back of the fireplace was black with soot, and I watched the fire-worms crawl over the stone heart-and-hands carved there, as the carbon caught fire and burned out. The log was all embers and would burn for hours.

Something coughed.

I turned and saw something moving in the shadows, an animal. The larl was blacker than black, a hole in the darkness, and my eyes swam to look at him. Slowly, lazily, he strode out onto the stones, stretched his back, yawned a tongue-curling yawn, and then stared at me with those great green eyes.

He spoke.

I was astonished, of course, but not in the way my father would have been. So much is inexplicable to a child! "Merry Christmas, Flip," the creature said, in a quiet, breathy voice. I could not describe its accent;

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I have heard nothing quite like it before or since. There was a vast alien amusement in his glance.

"And to you," I said politely.

The larl sat down, curling his body heavily about me. If I had wanted to run, I could not have gotten past him, though that thought did not occur to me then. "There is an ancient legend, Flip, I wonder if you have heard of it, that on Christmas Eve the beasts can speak in human tongue. Have your elders told you that?"

I shook my head.

"They are neglecting you." Such strange humor dwelt in that voice. "There is truth to some of those old legends, if only you knew how to get at it. Though perhaps not all. Some are just stories. Perhaps this is not happening now; perhaps I am not speaking to you at all?"

I shook my head. I did not understand. I said so.

"That is the difference between your kind and mine. My kind understands everything about yours, and yours knows next to nothing about mine. I would like to tell you a story, little one. Would you like that?"

"Yes," I said, for I was young and I liked stories very much.

He began:

When the great ships landed—

Oh God. When—no, no, no, wait. Excuse me. I'm shaken. I just this instant had a vision. It seemed to me that it was night and I was standing at the gates of a cemetery. And suddenly the air was full of light, planes and cones of light that burst from the ground and nested twittering in the trees. Fracturing the sky. I wanted to dance for joy. But the ground crumbled underfoot and when I looked down the shadow of the gates touched my toes, a cold rectangle of profoundest black, deep as all eternity, and I was dizzy and about to fall and I, and I . . .

Enough! I have had this vision before, many times. It must have been something that impressed me strongly in my youth, the moist smell of newly opened earth, the chalky whitewash on the picket fence. It must be. I do not believe in hobgoblins, ghosts, or premonitions. No, it does not bear thinking about. Foolishness! Let me get on with my story.

—When the great ships landed, I was feasting on my grandfather's brains. All his descendants gathered respectfully about him, and I, as youngest, had first bite. His wisdom flowed through me, and the wisdom of his ancestors and the intimate knowledge of those animals he had eaten for food, and the spirit of valiant enemies who had been killed and then honored by being eaten, just as if they were family. I don't suppose you understand this, little one.

I shook my head.

People never die, you see. Only humans die. Sometimes a minor part

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of a Person is lost, the doings of a few decades, but the bulk of his life is preserved, if not in this body, then in another. Or sometimes a Person will dishonor himself, and his descendants will refuse to eat him. This is a great shame, and the Person will go off to die somewhere alone.

The ships descended bright as newborn suns. The People had never seen such a thing. We watched in inarticulate wonder, for we had no language then. You have seen the pictures, the baroque swirls of colored metal, the proud humans stepping down onto the land. But I was there, and I can tell you, your people were ill. They stumbled down the gangplanks with the stench of radiation sickness about them. We could have destroyed them all then and there.

Your people built a village at Landfall and planted crops over the bodies of their dead. We left them alone. They did not look like good game. They were too strange and too slow and we had not yet come to savor your smell. So we went away, in baffled ignorance.

That was in early spring.

Half the survivors were dead by midwinter, some of disease but most because they did not have enough food. It was of no concern to us. But then the woman in the wilderness came to change our universe forever.

When you're older you'll be taught the woman's tale, and what desperation drove her into the wilderness. It's part of your history. But to myself, out in the mountains and winter-lean, the sight of her striding through the snows in her furs was like a vision of winter's queen herself. A gift of meat for the hungering season, life's blood for the solstice.

I first saw the woman while I was eating her mate. He had emerged from his cabin that evening as he did every sunset, gun in hand, without looking up. I had observed him over the course of five days and his behavior never varied. On that sixth nightfall I was crouched on his roof when he came out. I let him go a few steps from the door, then leapt. I felt his neck break on impact, tore open his throat to be sure, and ripped through his parka to taste his innards. There was no sport in it, but in winter we will take game whose brains we would never eat.

My mouth was full and my muzzle pleasantly, warmly moist with blood when the woman appeared. I looked up, and she was topping the rise, riding one of your incomprehensible machines, what I know now to be a snowstrider. The setting sun broke through the clouds behind her and for an instant she was embedded in glory. Her shadow stretched narrow before her and touched me, a bridge of darkness between us. We looked in one another's eyes . . .

Magda topped the rise with a kind of grim, joyless satisfaction. I am now a hunter's woman, she thought to herself. We will always be welcome at Landfall for the meat we bring, but they will never speak civilly to

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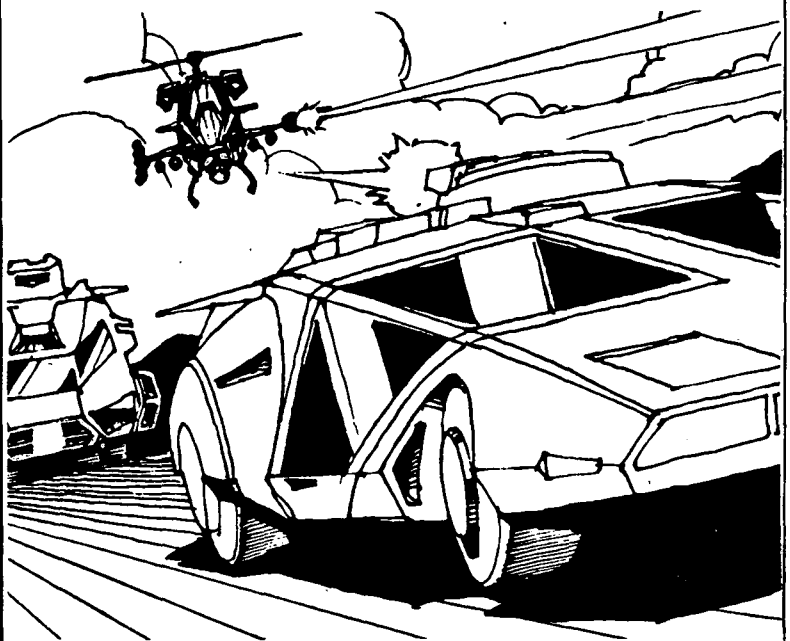

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me again. Good. I would choke on their sweet talk anyway. The baby stirred and without looking down she stroked him through the furs, murmuring, "Just a little longer, my brave little boo, and we'll be at our new home. Will you like that, eh?"

The sun broke through the clouds to her back, making the snow a red dazzle. Then her eyes adjusted, and she saw the black shape crouched over her lover's body. A very great distance away, her hands throttled down the snowstrider and brought it to a halt. The shallow bowl of land before her was barren, the snow about the corpse black with blood. A last curl of smoke lazily separated from the hut's chimney. The brute lifted its bloody muzzle and looked at her.

Time froze and knotted in black agony.

The larl screamed. It ran straight at her, faster than thought. Clumsily, hampered by the infant strapped to her stomach, Magda clawed the rifle from its boot behind the saddle. She shucked her mittens, fitted hands to metal that stung like hornets, flicked off the safety and brought the stock to her shoulder. The larl was halfway to her. She aimed and fired.

The larl went down. One shoulder shattered, slamming it to the side. It tumbled and rolled in the snow. "You sonofabitch!" Magda cried in triumph. But almost immediately the beast struggled to its feet, turned and fled.

The baby began to cry, outraged by the rifle's roar. Magda powered up the engine. "Hush, small warrior." A kind of madness filled her, a blind anesthetizing rage. "This won't take long." She flung her machine downhill, after the larl.

Even wounded, the creature was fast. She could barely keep up. As it entered the spare stand of trees to the far end of the meadow, Magda paused to fire again, burning a bullet by its head. The larl leaped away. From then on it varied its flight with sudden changes of direction and unexpected jogs to the side. It was a fast learner. But it could not escape Magda. She had always been a hothead, and now her blood was up. She was not about to return to her lover's gutted body with his killer still alive.

The sun set and in the darkening light she lost sight of the larl. But she was able to follow its trail by two-shadowed moonlight, the deep, purple footprints, the darker spatter of blood it left, drop by drop, in the snow.

It was the solstice, and the moons were full—a holy time. I felt it even as I fled the woman through the wilderness. The moons were bright on the snow. I felt the dread of being hunted descend on me, and in my inarticulate way I felt blessed.

But I also felt a great fear for my kind. We had dismissed the humans

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as incomprehensible, not very interesting creatures, slow-moving, bad-smelling, and dull-witted. Now, pursued by this madwoman on her fast machine, brandishing a weapon that killed from afar, I felt all natural order betrayed. She was a goddess of the hunt, and I was her prey.

The People had to be told.

I gained distance from her, but I knew the woman would catch up. She was a hunter, and a hunter never abandons wounded prey. One way or another, she would have me.

In the winter, all who are injured or too old must offer themselves to the community. The sacrifice rock was not far, by a hill riddled from time beyond memory with our burrows. My knowledge must be shared: The humans were dangerous. They would make good prey.

I reached my goal when the moons were highest. The flat rock was bare of snow when I ran limping in. Awakened by the scent of my blood, several People emerged from their dens. I laid myself down on the sacrifice rock. A grandmother of the People came forward, licked my wound, tasting, considering. Then she nudged me away with her forehead. The wound would heal, she thought, and winter was young; my flesh was not yet needed.

But I stayed. Again she nudged me away. I refused to go. She whined in puzzlement. I licked the rock.

That was understood. Two of the People came forward and placed their weight on me. A third lifted a paw. He shattered my skull, and they ate.

Magda watched through power binoculars from atop a nearby ridge. She saw everything. The rock swarmed with lean black horrors. It would be dangerous to go down among them, so she waited and watched the puzzling tableau below. The larl had wanted to die, she'd swear it, and now the beasts came forward daintily, almost ritualistically, to taste the brains, the young first and then the old. She raised her rifle, thinking to exterminate a few of the brutes from afar.

A curious thing happened then. All the larls that had eaten of her prey's brain leaped away, scattering. Those that had not eaten waited, easy targets, not understanding. Then another dipped to lap up a fragment of brain, and looked up with sudden comprehension. Fear touched her.

The hunter had spoken often of the larls, had said that they were so elusive he sometimes thought them intelligent. "Come spring, when I can afford to waste ammunition on carnivores, I look forward to harvesting a few of these beauties," he'd said. He was the colony's xenobiologist, and he loved the animals he killed, treasured them even as he smoked their flesh, tanned their hides, and drew detailed pictures of their internal organs. Magda had always scoffed at his theory that larls

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gained insight into the habits of their prey by eating their brains, even though he'd spent much time observing the animals minutely from afar, gathering evidence. Now she wondered if he were right.

Her baby whimpered, and she slid a hand inside her furs to give him a breast. Suddenly the night seemed cold and dangerous, and she thought: What am I doing here? Sanity returned to her all at once, her anger collapsing to nothing, like an ice tower shattering in the wind. Below, sleek black shapes sped toward her, across the snow. They changed direction every few leaps, running evasive patterns to avoid her fire.

"Hang on, kid," she muttered, and turned her strider around. She opened up the throttle.

Magda kept to the open as much as she could, the creatures following her from a distance. Twice she stopped abruptly and turned her rifle on her pursuers. Instantly they disappeared in puffs of snow, crouching belly-down but not stopping, burrowing toward her under the surface. In the eerie night silence, she could hear the whispering sound of the brutes tunneling. She fled.

Some frantic timeless period later—the sky had still not lightened in the east—Magda was leaping a frozen stream when the strider's left ski struck a rock. The machine was knocked glancingly upward, cybernetics screaming as they fought to regain balance. With a sickening crunch, the strider slammed to earth, one ski twisted and bent. It would take extensive work before the strider could move again.

Magda dismounted. She opened her robe and looked down on her child. He smiled up at her and made a gurgling noise.

Something went dead in her.

A fool. I've been a criminal fool, she thought. Magda was a proud woman who had always refused to regret, even privately, anything she had done. Now she regretted everything: Her anger, the hunter, her entire life, all that had brought her to this point, the cumulative madness that threatened to kill her child.

A larl topped the ridge.

Magda raised her rifle, and it ducked down. She began walking downslope, parallel to the stream. The snow was knee deep and she had to walk carefully not to slip and fall. Small pellets of snow rolled down ahead of her, were overtaken by other pellets. She strode ahead, pushing up a wake.

The hunter's cabin was not many miles distant; if she could reach it, they would live. But a mile was a long way in winter. She could hear the larls calling to each other, soft coughlike noises, to either side of the ravine. They were following the sound of her passage through the snow. Well, let them. She still had the rifle, and if it had few bullets left, *they* didn't know that. They were only animals.

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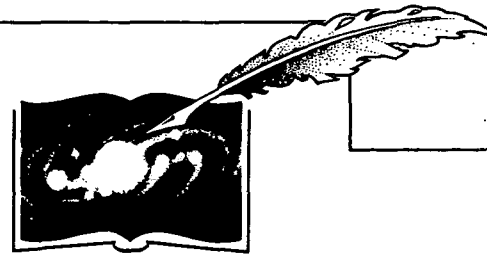

Algis Budrys on

L. RON HUBBARD's WRITERS OF THE FUTURE

The Writers of The Future Contest has been extended to September 30, 1988. It's still growing.

WOTF has become a landmark feature of the SF (Speculative Fiction) scene. As founded and planned by L. Ron Hubbard, entry in the Contest is free. It's limited to new authors of science fiction or fantasy who have professionally published no more than three short stories or one novelette. Every three months, a panel of distinguished SF writers names the top three finishers for outright cash grants of $1000, $750 and $500, respectively.

The monetary prizes are delivered shortly after the winners are notified. They are also symbolized by elegant trophies or certificates. Those are presented at the annual Awards Celebration. The recipients are brought to that event as the guests of WOTF. At the Awards, one of the year's four quarterly First Prize winners is announced as recipient of the L. Ron Hubbard Gold Award to The Author of the Writers of The Future Story of The Year, with its impressive trophy and an outright cash grant of an additional $4,000.

Winners, and some finalists, are offered excellent rates by Bridge Publications, Inc., for use of their stories in Bridge's annual anthology. That's separate from the Contest, and means additional income for the authors, as well as the largest SF-anthology readership of all time.

As you could see by reading a copy of "L. Ron Hubbard Presents WRITERS OF THE FUTURE," Volumes I, II or III, the Contest favors no particular type of SF over any other. The books also include how-to-write essays by the Contest judges, as well as an article by L. Ron Hubbard on the practicalities of artistic expression. Each book contains a complete set of Contest rules. It's a useful volume.

Every story in the Contest has an equal chance. Manuscripts are circulated to the judges with the authors' names removed. As Co-ordinating Judge, I evaluate every manuscript, and pass the finalists on to the ultimate judges who determine the winners. The only way to win the money, the trophies, and all the subsequent benefits, is to write a good story, and then enter it. If you think you'd like to do that, or if you'd like a detailed rules sheet, or have any questions whatever, write to:

L. Ron Hubbard's WRITERS OF THE FUTURE

P.O. Box 1630
Los Angeles, CA 90078

Please send a stamped self-addressed return envelope of the appropriate size with your manuscript or rules-request.

— Algis Budrys

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This high in the mountains, the trees were sparse. Magda descended a good quarter-mile before the ravine choked with scrub and she had to climb up and out or risk being ambushed. Which way? she wondered. She heard three coughs to her right, and climbed the left slope, alert and wary.

We herded her. Through the long night we gave her fleeting glimpses of our bodies whenever she started to turn to the side she must not go, and let her pass unmolested the other way. We let her see us dig into the distant snow and wait motionless, undetectable. We filled the woods with our shadows. Slowly, slowly, we turned her around. She struggled to return to the cabin, but she could not. In what haze of fear and despair she walked! We could smell it. Sometimes her baby cried, and she hushed the milky-scented creature in a voice gone flat with futility. The night deepened as the moons sank in the sky. We forced the woman back up into the mountains. Toward the end, her legs failed her several times; she lacked our strength and stamina. But her patience and guile were every bit our match. Once we approached her still form, and she killed two of us before the rest could retreat. How we loved her! We paced her, confident that sooner or later she'd drop.

It was at night's darkest hour that the woman was forced back to the burrowed hillside, the sacred place of the People where stood the sacrifice rock. She topped the same rise for the second time that night, and saw it. For a moment she stood helpless, and then she burst into tears.

We waited, for this was the holiest moment of the hunt, the point when the prey recognizes and accepts her destiny. After a time, the woman's sobs ceased. She raised her head and straightened her back.

Slowly, steadily, she walked downhill.

She knew what to do.

Larls retreated into their burrows at the sight of her, gleaming eyes dissolving into darkness. Magda ignored them. Numb and aching, weary to death, she walked to the sacrifice rock. It had to be this way.

Magda opened her coat, unstrapped her baby. She wrapped him deep in the furs and laid the bundle down to one side of the rock. Dizzily, she opened the bundle to kiss the top of his sweet head, and he made an angry sound. "Good for you, kid," she said hoarsely. "Keep that attitude." She was so tired.

She took off her sweaters, her vest, her blouse. The raw cold nipped at her flesh with teeth of ice. She stretched slightly, body aching with motion. God it felt good. She laid down the rifle. She knelt.

The rock was black with dried blood. She lay down flat, as she had earlier seen her larl do. The stone was cold, so cold it almost blanked out

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the pain. Her pursuers waited nearby, curious to see what she was doing; she could hear the soft panting noise of their breathing. One padded noiselessly to her side. She could smell the brute. It whined questioningly.

She licked the rock.

Once it was understood what the woman wanted, her sacrifice went quickly. I raised a paw, smashed her skull. Again I was youngest. Innocent, I bent to taste.

The neighbors were gathering, hammering at the door, climbing over one another to peer through the windows, making the walls bulge and breathe with their eagerness. I grunted and bellowed, and the clash of silver and clink of plates next door grew louder. Like peasant animals, my husband's people tried to drown out the sound of my pain with toasts and drunken jokes.

Through the window I saw Tevin-the-Fool's bonewhite skin gaunt on his skull, and behind him a slice of face—sharp nose, white cheeks—like a mask. The doors and walls pulsed with the weight of those outside. In the next room, children fought and wrestled, and elders pulled at their long white beards, staring anxiously at the closed door.

The midwife shook her head, red lines running from the corners of her mouth down either side of her stern chin. Her eye sockets were shadowy pools of dust. "Now push!" she cried. "Don't be a lazy sow!"

I groaned and arched my back. I shoved my head back and it grew smaller, eaten up by the pillows. The bedframe skewed as one leg slowly buckled under it. My husband glanced over his shoulder at me, an angry look, his fingers knotted behind his back.

All of Landfall shouted and hovered on the walls.

"Here it comes!" shrieked the midwife. She reached down to my bloody crotch, and eased out a tiny head, purple and angry, like a goblin.

And then all the walls glowed red and green and sprouted large flowers. The door turned orange and burst open, and the neighbors and crew flooded in. The ceiling billowed up, and aerialists tumbled through the rafters. A boy who had been hiding beneath the bed flew up laughing to where the ancient sky and stars shone through the roof.

They held up the child, bloody on a platter.

Here the Iarl touched me for the first time, that heavy black paw like velvet on my knee, talons sheathed. "Are you following this?" he asked. "Can you separate truth from fantasy, tell what is fact and what the mad imagery of emotions we did not share? No more could I. All that, the first birth of human young on this planet, I experienced in an instant. Blind with awe, I understood the personal tragedy and the communal triumph of that event, and the meaning of the lives and culture behind

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it. A second before, I lived as an animal, with an animal's simple thoughts and hopes. Then I ate of your ancestor and was lifted all in an instant halfway to godhood.

"As the woman had intended. She had died thinking of the child's birth, in order that we might share in it. She gave us that. She gave us more. She gave us *language*. We were wise animals before we ate her brain, and we were People afterward. We owed her so much. And we knew what she wanted from us." The larl stroked my cheek with his great, smooth paw, the ivory claws hooded but quivering slightly, as if about to awake.

I hardly dared breathe.

"That morning I entered Landfall, carrying the baby's sling in my mouth. It slept through most of the journey. At dawn I passed through the empty street as silently as I knew how. I came to the First Captain's house. I heard the murmur of voices within, the entire village assembled for worship. I tapped the door with one paw. There was sudden, astonished silence. Then slowly, fearfully, the door opened."

The larl was silent for a moment. "That was the beginning of the association of People with humans. We were welcomed into your homes, and we helped with the hunting. It was a fair trade. Our food saved many lives that first winter. No one needed know how the woman had perished, or how well we understood your kind.

"That child, Flip, was your ancestor. Every few generations we take one of your family out hunting, and taste his brains, to maintain our closeness with your line. If you are a good boy and grow up to be as bold and honest, as intelligent and noble a man as your father, then perhaps it will be you we eat."

The larl presented his blunt muzzle to me in what might have been meant as a friendly smile. Perhaps not; the expression hangs unreadable, ambiguous in my mind even now. Then he stood and padded away into the friendly dark shadows of the Stone House.

I was sitting staring into the coals a few minutes later when my second-eldest sister—her face a featureless blaze of light, like an angel's—came into the room and saw me. She held out a hand, saying, "Come on, Flip, you're missing everything." And I went with her.

Did any of this actually happen? Sometimes I wonder. But it's growing late, and your parents are away. My room is small but snug, my bed warm but empty. We can burrow deep in the blankets and scare away the cave-bears by playing the oldest winter games there are.

You're blushing! Don't tug away your hand. I'll be gone soon to some distant world to fight in a war for people who are as unknown to you as

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they are to me. Soldiers grow old slowly, you know. We're shipped frozen between the stars. When you are old and plump and happily surrounded by grandchildren, I'll still be young, and thinking of you. You'll remember me then, and our thoughts will touch in the void. Will you have nothing to regret? Is that really what you want?

I thought once that I could outrun the darkness. I thought—I must have thought—that by joining the militia I could escape my fate. But for all that I gave up my home and family, in the end the beast came anyway to eat my brain. Now I am alone. A month from now, in all this world, only you will remember my name. Let me live in your memory.

Come, don't be shy. Let's put the past aside and get on with our lives. That's better. Blow the candle out, love, and there's an end to my tale.

All this happened long ago, on a planet whose name has been burned from my memory. ●

NEXT ISSUE:

Isaac Asimov, the Good Doctor himself, returns with a seasonal bonus for your next issue, our Mid-December cover story, "Christmas Without Rodney." Yes, it's another Christmas story, complementing those we published this issue, but it's a great deal *more* than that—a brand-new Robot story, for one thing, and, as is to be expected from Isaac, a slyly-witty and deceptively-quiet story that turns out to have a most unsettling string in its tale; don't miss it. Multiple award-winner **Harlan Ellison**—whose screenplay for *I, Robot: The Movie* (published here last year) is slugging it out for a Hugo with some stiff competition even as I write these words—also returns to these pages next month with a major new story, one of the most important he's written in some time; the angry, sad, and compassionate story of a man who is driven to discover "The Function of Dream Sleep"—this is one that will haunt you for a long time to come.

ALSO IN MID-DECEMBER: Nebula-winner **Kim Stanley Robinson** takes us deep *inside* the Moon for a brilliant tale of passion, politics, slavery, and transcendence, in "The Lunatics"; from the black pits of Luna, **Gregory Frost** then takes us to nineteenth-century Russia in the last days of the Czars, for the chilling and evocative saga of "Lizaveta"; **Ron Goulart** returns after a long absence to give new meaning to the term "re-run" in the ghoulishly-funny "Here Comes Bunky"; new writer **Allen M. Steele** makes his *IAsfm* debut with some red-hot entertainment served up "Live from the Mars Hotel"; Hugo-and-World Fantasy Award winner **Avram Davidson** gives us a wry and witty look at "One Morning With Samuel, Dorothy, and William"; and new writer **Kathe Koja** makes *her IAsfm* debut with an unsettling study of the sacrifices that sometimes must be made if you're going to bridge the great "Distances" of time and space and death. Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our Mid-December issue on sale on your newsstands on November 15, 1988.

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LADY WITH TEDDY BEAR

by R.V. Branham

In R.V. Branham's first tale for *IAsfm*, two very different women find their own ways to cope with the insanity of urban living.

art: Janet Aulisio

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It is the first weekend of the month. So: Myra has to make sure her direct deposit has been banked properly (it never is); she has to go shopping. She has to avoid the lady with the teddy bear. She doesn't *have* to, but she *wants* to—avoid the lady. And who wouldn't want to avoid a lady with a teddy bear? The banking and shopping, she doesn't *want* to do, but *has* to do.

She goes along the new tracks past the ruins of the mall, past the eucalyptus trees with their "DO NOT FEED KOALAS" signs. A camera pivots, following her. In the lot, behind the shell of the abandoned Montgomery Ward, is her stepson's van. He used to take her to do her banking and shopping, in his van. Well, it *was* his van, before he sold it. Still the same license plate: JESUJOY. Still the same screen covering the rear window, a depiction of Mount Fuji. Myra had wanted that screen; indeed, her stepson had promised to remove it before selling the van.

Just like he promised to write from wherever in those damn Le-Grange Points that Saudi corp' had sent him to.

She walks past the back of a Sashimi Queen, notes the vibrantly sprayed graffiti—"LOS FRACTALS" is the name of the local leisure org'. Leisure org' hell, a gang of thugs is a gang of thugs is a gang of thugs. Myra thinks of the signature as dog's piss, demarcations of territorial perimeters.

She'd read a story in yesterday's lawn throwaway, about a kid who'd gotten half his face and three-quarters of his skull blown away for failing to take note of these territorial markings. Looking at the picture of the murder victim, she'd recognized him as a boy who'd done her front yard, badly, and tried to stiff her for a few extra bucks. "Chingate and die, vieja," he'd finally told her. "I'll see your dead tuchis." Well, now he wouldn't.

Myra finally reaches her bank. Sure enough, the lady with teddy bear is in the front. Myra steps over the huge fracture in the asphalt, which over months has eroded and become a sizable pothole, and enters through the rear. The Autotellers were supposed to be on line again, so the flyer said last week. Or so another flyer said last month. Or so another flyer said last year. So the lines at all two windows trail to the opposite wall. And everyone is about her age, give or take a cane, and everyone clutches a green bankbook and a brown checkbook. She joins the second line. It's as boring as the other, as dead.

Time. To kill. Time. Myra reaches into her cotton tote bag, takes out a reprint of an old Le Carré, *Tinker Tailor Cowboy Sailor*. (That, at any rate, is what her neighbor Mrs. Wein had called the CD video adaptation she'd checked from the library.) In front of Myra are two men.

Two men talking about the Old Testament, about the CD one had checked out from the library, about fathers sleeping with daughters.

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"Incense," the fat bald one says, waving his beret as though it were hot in the bank. "Incense," he keeps calling it.

Myra just cannot go on with her book, not with those two rattling away. She looks at the base of the fat bald one's skull; sure enough, a "chippy." Will she be like them, or worse, like the lady with teddy bear, ten years from now—? *Five?*

The tellers are taking *forever.* Since they have failed to get the L. A. nets back on line, many of those banks and stores that cannot justify the expense of a dish have put in the new plasma PC's. Now, two years later, transactions are always taking longer. Longer than before. Before these Pentagon-rejected stupid new bubble-brain PC's.

"Can I help you, Myra?" It is the chattery Canadian.

"Get rid of those Goddamn PC's, get good calculators, that's what you can do." Myra gets her purse and her checkbook, and has the chattery Canadian verify her Direct Deposit account.

"And I'd like to cash this, please."

The teller looks at her check and bankbook. "Myra, do you have your new account?"

"*What* new account?"

"Your new account *number*, I mean."

"What are you talking about?"

"We've changed all the account numbers."

"No one's mailed *me* any notice about this. So how could I know my new account number if nobody's told me?"

The teller sighs. "Messages were sent on the nets."

"The lines in my neighborhood are still *ruptured*, dear. Half of us still have to use *post*al service, you know. They've barely got phone service back."

The teller blushes, red maple. "I'm sorry."

"Some of us, like most of the population, even have to *go* to the store. The mountain doesn't come to Mohammed, not these days."

The chattery Canadian nods. "I have to go look it up, then."

"Look what up?"

"Your new account number."

"Well, then, go look it up!" After the teller leaves her, Myra begins talking to herself. Moron is the kindest of her utterances. She wishes her stepson were with her; he has a way of dealing with these fools. When the teller returns, Myra asks to see the manager, Concha Vasquez.

"She doesn't work here anymore, she was transfered to Bel Air." The teller returns the bankbook back to her, with the old account number crossed out and a new one written above that.

"Who's in charge now, then? *The bubble-brain PC?"*

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"You'll have to see Mr. Louis." The teller points to a desk at the far end of the bank, behind the loan officer's desk.

"Thank you."

"Have a nice—"

Myra has left the teller, is headed toward Mr. Louis.

"—day."

There is a display for new accounts, offering a free koala or teddy bear with each one. Myra, in passing it, is tempted to knock it down.

"Well." The manager, having seen her coming, rises to greet her. "What can I do to help you—?"

"WELL!" Myra is as surprised as Mr. Louis at the loudness of her reply. She continues, raising her voice even louder. "WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP ME—" Her voice echoes through the silence as everyone turns to listen. "—IS TELL ME WHY IN HELL WE WEREN'T NOTIFIED ABOUT THE CHANGING OF OUR ACCOUNT NUMBERS!"

Mr. Louis smiles. "I can understand your concern, but do you really feel anything is solved by raising your voice?" He sits and motions her to sit. To sit down. To sit down and shut up so he can bullshit her. "The head office didn't think it was important enough to post mail." He looks her in the eye. "We did net them, after all—"

Myra, still standing, is not satisfied: "HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT EL GRANDE, HOW SECURITY PACIFIC WENT FROM BEING THE TALLEST BUILDING ON THE WEST COAST TO BEING THE LONGEST, HOW 80,000 PEOPLE DIED? YOU THINK ANY OF US WOULD EVEN *BE* IN LINE HERE IF THE NETS FUNCTIONED?" Myra stops for an instant, but just an instant. "AND NOW YOU ARE TELLING ME THE HEAD OFFICE DOESN'T CONSIDER OUR ACCOUNT NUMBERS TO BE IMPORTANT—?!"

"That's not what I meant—"

"IT'S WHAT YOU *SAID*. BUT *I* CONSIDER MY ACCOUNT IMPORTANT. IT'S WHERE MY *MONEY* IS! THIS IS A *BANK*, ISN'T IT?"

"YES, GODDAMNIT—!" Again, heads turn. "Look, Mrs. . . . ? What do you want?"

"A letter of apology, for starters."

"That—that can be arranged—"

"I want the letter matted and framed."

The manager smiles viciously. "Would you like a teddy bear?"

Myra demands *two*. Two plastic-wrapped teddy bears.

On her way out, she sees the lady coming into the bank and asking people for money. That lady, who, ever since Myra gave her a tub of yoghurt and half her fruit, has developed a radar for her. Myra cannot remember when Mrs. Wein and she first saw her, at the laundromat, the post office, the store, and now the bank. Mrs. Wein had given her the

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title of "The Lady With Teddy Bear," because she usually has a tattered teddy bear with her.

Myra wonders what Mrs. Wein would call *her*. "Lady with *two* teddy bears?"

Myra uses the back door, to avoid her. That lady makes her feel sad, depresses her.

While drinking coffee at the Meiji Take-Out, Myra wonders who she should give the teddy bears to. It dawns on her that the lady didn't have her teddy bear with her, was bearless.

Myra is at the supermarket, going up and down the aisles, carting her teddy bears along. Looking at the shelves sometimes angers her . . . all the bargains are for jumbo sizes, never for the one-serving sizes. Another thing which sometimes angers her, which is angering her now, is the way they always rearrange things. Sugar goes from aisle one to aisle ten to three to four to seven and back to one again. Ditto coffee, toilet paper, or anything else she might desperately want.

Near the dairy section, under a veil of ammonia, she notices a stench of sour milk and rotten eggs. She lets go of her cart while examining noodles and the cart glides down the slanted aisle, finally hitting a rack of day-old bread, which it knocks over. The clerk who sets the rack back up, sets the bread back on it, glares at Myra as she retrieves her cart. She feels much less embarrassed after watching this happen to a few other shoppers.

The store's sound system plays easy listening. Last year they were mining all her favorite old rock songs, this year the muzak is from ancient Hollywood musicals. "Diamonds are a girl's best friend." Horseshit, Myra thinks. *Double coupons are a girl's best friend.*

A holo of Marilyn points at *Bargains*.

Myra approaches the checkstands. Only two carts are lined up at the express-ten-items-or-less-no-checks-cash-only line; her cart becomes the third. She sees a *People*, notices the seal has been cracked, and, picking it up and turning the dial, scans it. She would never buy a magazine which can be scanned between checkout line and cashier. And certainly not a tablet tabloid. She likes the smell of ink, the way it smudges, the very impermanence of printed periodicals. She chuckles as she discovers a photo of Billy Idol, now William Idol, a member of the House of Commons. No, she wouldn't buy this. Not that she buys *any* magazines these days; a *New Yorker* subscription and a *Herald Examiner* home delivery are just about all her budget can handle.

She takes her instant coffee, instant potatoes (that's what that bank manager reminded her of, instant potatoes), margarine, two tubs of peach yoghurt, a dozen X-large eggs, wheat bread (why did she pick the wheat,

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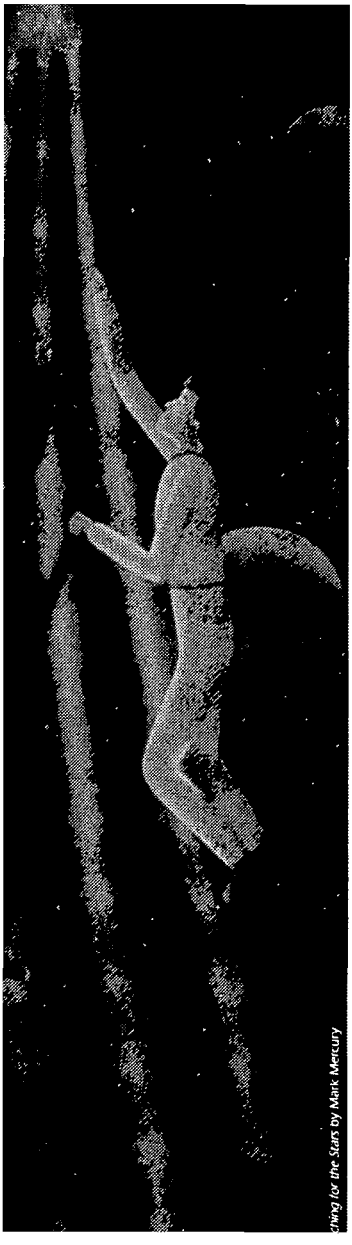

Reaching for the Stars by Mark Mercury

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that's her stepson's favorite bread; Myra has always gone for the sourdough), two cans of tuna, three of cat food, two TV dinners, and a jug of chablis. Sets them on the revolving countertop.

There is now a long line of carts behind Myra. "Lady, you got more than the ten-item limit," says a young man behind her. "You can't be in this line." He reminds her of her cousin, when they were growing up, with his punk revival mohawk; and of her stepson's science teacher, with his original but greying punk edition. And the mohawks looked damned silly *then,* too. An Amerindian's mohawk would not be electric green and pink.

Myra turns to the young man, has a sudden urge to touch his mohawk, to pluck a tuft of his electric hair: "Are you addressing me?"

"Bet your ass. *Ten* items—"

"Look, coffee, yoghurt, potatoes, margarine, eggs, bread, tuna, cat food—"

"You got too much stuff."

"Mind your own business."

"Yeah." The cashier agrees. "She's got ten." The cashier rings up Myra, the voice of the register naming each item and its price. Myra is glad that talking cash registers survived El Grande. "Sixty dollars, seventy six cents."

"These teddy bears in the cart," the boxboy inquires. "They yours?"

"Yeah," Myra replies. "I got them at the bank."

"I'll bet she did," the young man with the mohawk says.

"Sixty dollars." The cashier gazes at Myra. "Sixty dollars and seventy six."

Myra looks at the cashier. "That can't be right."

The cashier glares back. Sighs. "That's what I rang up—"

"I don't care if it rang Little Town of Bethlehem, I'm telling you I don't have more than twenty-twenty-five dollars worth of groceries. I estimated it as I bought—"

"C'mon, old lady, pay her."

"Yeah," says someone else.

"Look." Myra turns on the young man with the mohawk, notices his pimply moustache. "The clerk made an error, I'm trying to figure it out, 'kay?"

"Pay the cashier, old lady!"

"LISTEN, YOU LITTLE PISHER, *YOU* PAY THE STUPID BITCH! *YOU* PAY HER SIXTY BUCKS FOR TWENTY-FIVE BUCKS WORTH OF GROCERIES!"

Again, as in the bank, quiet descends. The manager is rushing from the back. The cashier, examining her register, blushes. "I'm sorry. I forgot to void the sale before."

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"What's the problem," the manager wants to know when he reaches them.

"Nothing."

"A lot of noise to make over nothing."

Myra turns to him, smiles. "Cashier just made a mistake, an honest mistake; she just caught it now. Thanks for your trouble."

The manager shrugs. "No problem."

"A bunch of jerkoffs." The young man with the mohawk puts a tray of sushi from the deli, four six-packs of beer, and a huge sack of stale popcorn onto the revolving checkstand counter.

Myra turns to him: "You have more than ten items there—"

There is a shrieking and confusion at the front of the store, by the glass doors. The manager and a male cashier seem to be struggling with a lady. With *her*. The lady with teddy bear.

Myra takes the cart and heads toward the scene. By the doors are display racks of kitty litter, firewood, charcoal, and stuffed animals.

The manager and cashier have subdued the lady. Myra sees stuffing and cloth limbs and button eyes on the floor. The assistant manager, who went to school with her stepson, is going toward the phone. She sees Myra. "Hi."

"What's wrong?"

"That chippy lady. She tore up a few teddy bears—manager wants me to call up the cops."

"But that's not right, she can't help it—"

"Somebody's got to pay." The young lady starts to dial.

Myra looks at the vagrant lady, who indeed has a row of chips above her right ear, and she looks at the mess. "I'll pay."

The assistant manager hangs up, and looks at her. "Are you sure you want to?"

"C'mon." Myra laughs. "Tell me the damage before I change my mind."

"I'll have to check with the manager . . . he doesn't like police reports—I'm sure he'll go along."

While she talks to her boss, Myra looks at the begging lady, the chippy lady. Myra remembers when they called them Bag Ladies. Street People. The Homeless. Now, it's chippy lady.

A lady with teddy bear.

For the first time *really* looks at her: She looks like she might be Myra's age, but is such a wreckage that her true age is impossible to tell. She was once a beauty, in that Hispanic fashion. Probably. But not now. The only thing she has left are the high checkbones.

Cheekbones are the last thing to go. The absolute final vestige of youth and beauty.

* * *

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"What's your name?" Myra is pushing the shopping cart along the sidewalk; the lady follows. Her bag is in the cart with Myra's groceries and the two teddy bears. So the lady follows Myra, who asks, "¿Como se llama?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I *thought* you knew English!" Myra tips the cart back so the front wheels can clear the nastier cracks, and then lifts the back by the handle so the back wheels don't get caught. She reaches an intersection and carefully lowers the cart to the street. "Just two more blocks."

"Two more blocks to *what*?"

"To *home*. I think you wear my size; least I can do is let you shower and give you clean clothes."

"You promised a teddy bear."

Myra tilts the cart and heaves it back onto the sidewalk.

"I heard them call you Myra, that's *your* name. I'll tell you mine if you can tell me what you want from me."

Myra stops, grasping the cart, which lurches to a stop. "*Want?* What do *I* want from *you*?" Myra shakes her head in woe. "What I *want* is to help."

"Why?"

Myra looks at her; the lady with teddy bear's eyes look rheumy, her nose is broken in two places—at one point tilting to the right and at another to the left. She wonders if those chips have been looked at by a medical technician or social worker or even a cop, if the chips still metabolically prod her into producing the lithium or enzymes or whatever else she needs to be relatively sane. "I don't really know why," Myra finally confesses. She smiles, shrugs. "I don't."

"My first name's Lucinda, my last is—"

"I know your last name, and your middle initial—manager told me."

Lucinda becomes angry: "What else'd he tell you."

"That's all." Myra pushes the cart again, negotiates more sidewalk cracks. "Over here, third house, past the chinaberry tree."

"They didn't tell you 'bout my sister, tha's a fuckin' lie!"

"No one's mentioned your sister, no one except you."

Lucinda is walking right behind her, almost catching the backs of Myra's red shoes with her toes, almost tripping her up. "No one 'cept me?"

Myra turns right, up a red cement path—a duller red than her shoes, which are the color of clotted blood—to an L-shaped trio of apartments, painted a very light green with yellow trim. "We're here."

"Oh." Lucinda's nose twitches in response to the stink of honeysuckle; her eyes widen as she notices the vine's tendrils glomming onto the

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mailboxes, the windchimes—one set bamboo and another brass or tin, the porchlight, the very ceiling, followed by green shoots of the vine.

Mrs. Wein is sitting under her jacaranda tree, which is not yet in bloom. She has a small oxygen tank with her, the color of those olives with those awful pimentos, from which she takes occasional draughts.

Myra sits facing her, in one of Mrs. Wein's unraveling canvas-back chairs. "How's the old emphysema doing lately?"

"Tank and a half a month." Mrs. Wein takes another draught, and slowly exhaling, sighs. She looks at Myra, who is staring at her slippers—bunny rabbit slippers with ears. "I'm not too proud to pass up a good deal—two pair for two bucks, K-Mart." She adjusts her glasses frames, which are constantly on the verge of breaking, constantly sliding down her alpine nose, and then Brings It Up: "Saw who you brought home today."

"But you were inside." Myra laughs, a short *ha*.

"The lady with the teddy bear—"

"Her name is Lucinda—"

"—So you've become her social worker."

"Nothing like that. She's only crazy when she's been drinking. Or her chips malfunction—"

"—You *have* become her social worker!" Mrs. Wein adjusts her glasses. "Not that I don't approve, 's the Christian Thing."

"I'm not a Christian . . . besides, *you're* a Jew."

"A Jew who has accepted Jesus. Maybe some day, *some* day, you will too." Myra laughs. Mrs. Wein frowns. "You think it's safe to let her shower by herself?"

"She insisted; I don't blame her, either. A person needs privacy. And she *needed* a shower." Myra sighs, not in lamentation, but in yearning. But yearning for what?

"Going to put her up for a while, maybe rent Ron's room out?"

"I can't rent his room; he still has things in it. I may let her sleep on the couch for a day or so."

"It'd be good for both of you."

" . . . I said that I *may*."

" . . . Go on." Then: "She *needs* someone, and you *need to be needed*."

"That woman'd be a real pain in the ass; her sister—she uses her address for Disability—threw her out . . . until she's clean. She says her sister was trying to frame her for the murder of her niece—That sounds paranoid."

" . . . She is on the chip, after all."

"*Chips*, she's got an earlobe full."

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Mrs. Wein takes another draught from her tank, and, in exhaling, comments: "Oh!"

" 'Oh!' what?" Myra, on seeing where Mrs. Wein is staring, turns. Lucinda is on her porch, putting a honeysuckle flower in her greying hair, above the right ear . . . wearing a pair of Myra's jeans and an old Czechoslovakian lace blouse she had grown tired of *years* ago. When scrubbed and washed and shampooed; when decently clothed, she looks human, she looks quite handsome, even with that jagged nose. Perhaps *because* of that nose.

"Hello, Lucinda. My name is Mrs. Wein. Please, join us. I have another chair on my porch."

Lucinda hesitates.

"C'mon," Myra calls. "Welcome to the human race." Then, to Mrs. Wein, she whispers: "I took her chip off, cleaned the tip with a cotton swab, and put it back on before she could react." Lucinda giggles nervously, and, finding a chair, joins them.

"Would you," Mrs. Wein offers Lucinda, "would you like a bit of *real* air?"

That night, Myra prepares *two* TV dinners. Chun King. She gives Lucinda club soda with lemon and sneaks a bit of wine into her own club soda. She pours five gallons of twice-boiled water into a pot for its third boiling. While the dinners are still in the oven, there is a familiar scratching at the kitchen door.

Lucinda starts, jumping as though someone'd pulled all her strings at once. "What's that?"

"Trotsky." Myra gets up to open the door; she opens a can, then scoops half of it into a bowl on the floor. She seals the can, puts it in the fridge, and *then* opens the door. Trotsky snakes through her legs, pruurprrurr, straight for the food.

Myra returns to the living room; glances at the *TV Guide*. Nothing nada nichtigkeit. "Trotsky belongs, belonged, to my stepson."

" . . . 's he dead?"

"No. He's up in the Els. Works with the Saudis."

The cat brushes against Lucinda's leg, and she bends to stroke it. "Trotsky—"

"He named the cat that because it has a black beard and a bandit mask, like eye-glasses."

"My father read Trotsky, in the original Spanish."

" . . . *Now, wait a minute*; Trotsky was *Russian*—"

"He was in Mexico a long time."

"So he was. . . . " Myra remembers a lousy CD about Leon Trotsky's exile, about his assassination.

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"What happened to your cat?"

Myra looks at Lucinda: "What?"

"He has a scar all along his side."

"Oh, that. He got into a fight with a koala, his claws against a marsupial's. We had to stuff his intestines back in before rushing him to Uncle Vet." The oven timer rings.

" . . . 's ready." Myra gets up from her armchair, feeling a small strain on her knees and thighs. "Shit, I forgot to set the table."

"I set it already, Myra."

And so she has; Lucinda has. Myra notes three settings at the dining room table. One of the Goddamn bank teddy bears is sitting at attention, still smothered in plastic, facing one of the plates. Blue bear. Blue plate.

Just ignore it. Myra sets the tin foil trays on her plate and on Lucinda's. Lucinda takes a spoon and puts half of her dinner on the third plate, for the teddy bear.

Myra gets off the train at Rosecrans and Avalon, takes the Rosecrans bus to Yukon, in a part of the basin which had gone full swing from strawberry patches to single family tract houses to condo townhouses and Tudor bunker concrete apartments, only to revert back to strawberry patches and tract houses and ruins of condos. Two streets *south*, and east of Yukon. Fourth house on the south side. Blue and white. Or white and blue. The paint has so peeled as to make it hard to tell.

She knocks at the door. "Come in!"

So she does.

"Back here, in the kitchen."

Myra goes through a hallway with layers of peeling wallpaper revealing layers of peeling wallpaper, into a grimy kitchen with all-too-good light. A woman who looks like a younger version of Lucinda, with a straight nose, is ironing. "There's coffee in the pot, still warm." Myra finds a cup, hanging with a dozen others under a yellowing cabinet. "There's cream in the fridge."

"I prefer mine black."

"Tears through your stomach that way."

"I'll take my chances."

"Suit yourself."

Myra pauses, collecting her thoughts. "I'm glad you let me come over—"

"I wanted to *meet* you, phone call's not good enough."

"She's responding to the new chips really well."

"She usually *does*," the sister says, without a break in her ironing rhythm, "*when* they're new, and she hasn't jostled 'em loose, or as long as they haven't corroded. But, like I said on the phone, after Yogi died—"

"Yogi?"

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"—My baby, after my baby died, Lucinda felt guilty, sort of responsible. She's always been strange, a bit whacko; but she started drinking."

"So then your husband asked her to leave?"

"Yeah. It was his *right*, y'know."

"I'm not judging, I know it's not easy living with a mentally ill person. I had an aunt like that. Only we didn't have chips then, we had to use these medications."

"You willing to take on a schizoid roommate?"

"I'm willing to try it. Rent and utilities, they're a bit much when you're on a fixed income."

"Tell me about a fixed income; my husband's wages have been frozen *two* years now . . . which is why I have to work part time." The sister stops her ironing. "Look, lady—"

"Myra—"

"—*Whatever*—I *do* love my sister; but unless she stays dry, has those chips plugging away every hour of *every* day, she is hell on wheels. If she can hold it together, totally, for a few months, she can come back." She reaches for an envelope in a cupboard, and hands it to Myra. "I have a friend who's a cop; he did a check on you for me; you're okay. Maybe foolish . . . but okay."

"I already took Lucinda to D. M. V., to put in a change of address."

"Fine. Maybe you'll be the one who helps my sister come back to us. Come back to me."

Myra can only shrug. "Maybe."

"But maybe not." She continues to iron. "Good luck. I mean that."

As Myra leaves, she hears her call: "*Vaya con dios*." And then, lower: "*Pero vayate*."

When Myra returns home, there is an ambulance and a fire brigade truck in the front. Oh God, not Mrs. Wein!

It isn't.

There are scorch marks on the porch, by the mailboxes. Half the vines are charred. A volunteer fireman approaches her:

"You the roommate?"

"Yes, the lease is in my name."

"Paramedics had to suppress her; neighbor says she accidentally set the porch on fire, trying to light a hibachi; she had been drinking, and one of her chips was defective; but it was really the drinking—"

"*What*—?! She doesn't drink; it makes her sick."

"Well, she did; threw up all over the place."

After the fire brigade and paramedics have left, Myra summons the courage to inspect the house. It's not *that* bad, not with Mrs. Wein and Mrs. Rodrigues from across the street being almost done cleaning up.

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Just a smell of wine and vomit and Pine Sol. Mrs. Wein is on her knees. "It is true, Mrs. Wein, that she set the fire *accidentally?*"

Mrs. Wein does not look up. "That's what I told them."

"But it is *true*."

"*That is what I told them.*"

Later, that evening, after Mrs. Wein and Mrs. Rodrigues have left, after Myra has found the charred remains of the teddy bear in the garbage can in the back; after Lucinda wakes up, groggy and pensive, Myra makes a decision.

She tells Lucinda of the decision.

The decision is this: Myra will allow no booze in the house, even if it means giving up drinking herself. If Lucinda *ever* pulls another stunt like this again, she is out on her ass. Back to the streets.

Lucinda does not get drunk again, over the next few months. She steadily improves; she doesn't even need her teddy bear. Lucinda joins Myra and Mrs. Wein under the purple canopy of the jacaranda tree, every day. . . . Lucinda even surprises Mrs. Wein by finding cloth at a yard sale and replacing the canvas backing of the chairs. Lucinda and Myra sand and repaint the scorched front porch. Myra saves on shopping, now that she can buy jumbo sizes.

With the money they save, the two take in the five-buck matinees on Tuesdays.

Once a month they visit Lucinda's case worker, who shows Myra how to change Lucinda's chips, which should be done quarterly.

One day a letter arrives from the Saudi colony in L-4. Myra opens it, but only gets halfway through the letter; the letter falls behind her dresser, consigned to a limbo of dust and dark. Later, looking for it, even assisted by Lucinda and Mrs. Wein, she can't find it.

"I have a confession, Myra."

"What, Lucinda?"

"That day, of the fire . . . I *did* set it on purpose; I was trying to kill the honeysuckle. I'd bumped my head against a cabinet, and felt funny; I found your wine, and the bottle of scotch you used to keep in the cabinet above the stove, and before I knew it, that honeysuckle vine was talking to me, was *threatening* me—"

"Forget it; it's in the past."

"I only thought it'd be best to tell you; I feel better now."

"Good."

A week later, Lucinda asks if they can invite her sister and brother-in-law over for dinner. Myra says she would like to think about it; she discusses it with Mrs. Wein, who sides with Lucinda.

A date is set, in late June.

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Myra gets a present, a secret present for Lucinda, wraps it in the tinseliest wrap and with the brightest bow, and then hides it.

Myra has to go back to the supermarket, for an extra something she had forgotten.

The big day arrives; Lucinda makes dinner. Spaghetti with bacon and sausage and meatballs.

It is night, night time, time for the party.

Lucinda's sister and brother-in-law arrive.

Myra lets them in, sits down with them and chitchats while Lucinda makes dinner.

". . . Smells terrific." Lucinda's sister smiles broadly at Myra.

"Lucinda is a very good cook."

"Yeah; I'd almost forgotten."

"When are we going to get to see the Cinderella?"

Lucinda's sister nudges her husband in the ribs, sharply. "Not nice. Not nice at all."

"Sorry."

"Excuse me." Myra rises. "Let me consult the chef about visitations." Myra enters the kitchen. "Don't forget, you have to change your chips."

"Yes, damnit already—! That's the second time you've reminded me tonight."

"Mind if your sister and brother-in-law come in—?"

"How do I look?"

"Pale. Let me help you with the make-up." She grabs the glass of grapefruit and club soda: "Drink up, before you get heat prostration." Myra opens a window while Lucinda drinks the juice. "Let's turn the burners off." As they head to the bedroom, Myra calls out:

"JUST A SEC' . . . LUCINDA HAS TO TOUCH UP A BIT!"

Lucinda opens the bedroom door, sees the gift. "You shouldn't have—"

"I shouldn't have what—?"

Lucinda is tearing open the wrappings. She opens the box. There is a card, in Spanish: "To Lucinda, from your friend the honeysuckle bush." In the box is the other teddy bear, also from the bank, also blue, still in plastic. Lucinda begins to cry; her make-up runs, runs terribly.

"You'd better change those chips, Lucinda." Myra gives her three chips—discarded ones she had rescued from the trash can the month before. "Here, you don't want to get dehydrated, do you." Myra holds a glass of grapefruit juice and club soda. And vodka.

"SOMETHING'S BURNING!" Lucinda's sister is shouting.

Lucinda rushes from the bedroom, clutching her teddy bear. She rushes into the kitchen, where her sister and brother-in-law are trying to salvage the burnt spaghetti.

The brother-in-law turns, sees Lucinda.

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"Jesus Christ! Lookit the fruitcake!" He turns to his wife: "This was a stupid idea. I'm leaving. Now."

"It's just an accident," Lucinda's sister is pleading.

"Just *look* at your sister. Skunk fuckin' drunk and playing with teddy bears! I'll be in the car. Waiting. For five minutes."

Lucinda can only cry; her sister, on the verge of tears herself, flees the room: "No more chances, Lucinda! No more!"

Myra grabs Lucinda from behind: "Let me check." She removes a chip, and then inserts a suppressant chip. "Just go lie down. I'll try to talk to your sister."

Myra rushes outside, down the path, and catches Lucinda's sister and brother-in-law before they leave. "I'm sorry things turned out so bad. But your sister is *sick*. I can cope, usually—she loves you!"

The sister is bawling away; the brother-in-law starts the car: "Listen, Myra; I think you're a saint, trying to put up with Lucinda's bullshit—I *know* she's a sicko, and can't help it; but *I* don't wanna be around her; and her sister's had a whole lifetime's worth! Thanks really, thanks, but no thanks."

He drives off.

Myra waves.

Mrs. Wein comes out.

"What happened?"

"Lucinda just—just couldn't cope."

"That's sad. I'll light a candle for her."

"Please, Mrs. Wein, go back in, you'll get sick."

The next morning, while Lucinda is asleep, Myra removes the chips and the suppressant, and inserts the *real* new ones. Myra returns an hour later, brings Lucinda toast and orange juice and coffee.

"It was bad last night, what happened—wasn't it, Myra?"

Myra kisses Lucinda on the forehead. "You're very sick. But *I* can help you; stay with me and you'll be fine. *We'll* be fine."

The next day, Mrs. Wein has to go to the hospital, due to her worsening emphysema. It is the first Friday of the month. Lucinda and Myra make sure their Direct Deposits were banked properly. They go along the new tracks, past the ruins of the old mall. The new graffiti. Everyone lines up at the bank, clutching brown checkbooks and blue bankbooks.

" . . . Think the teddy's okay, Myra?"

"Sure." Myra squeezes Lucinda's shoulder. "He's watching his favorite show."

"I'm glad he has a TV to watch."

"So am I, Lucinda." ●

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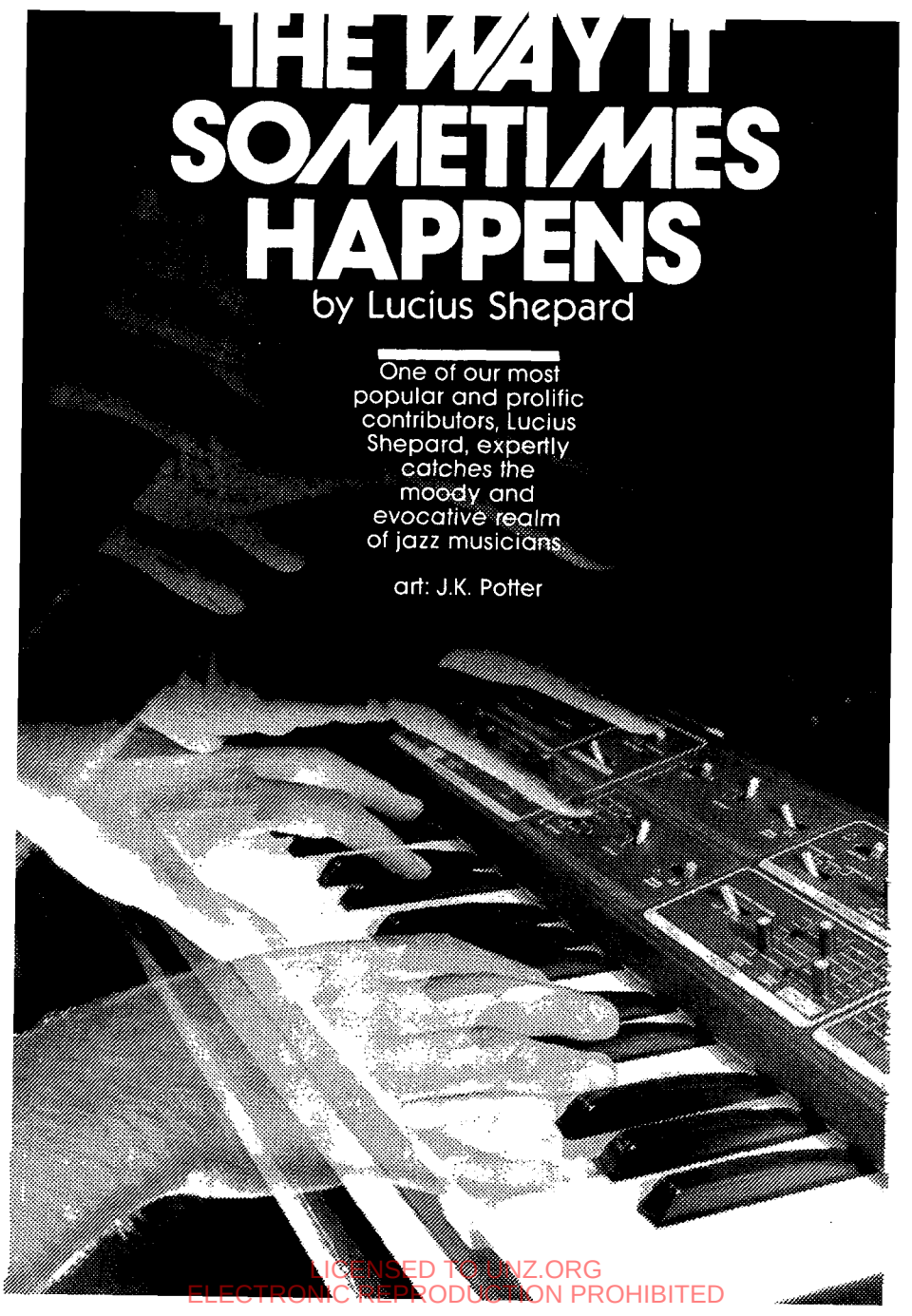
THE WAY IT SOMETIMES HAPPENS

by Lucius Shepard

One of our most popular and prolific contributors, Lucius Shepard, expertly catches the moody and evocative realm of jazz musicians.

art: J.K. Potter



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Guys who're in the know say you can't talk about music, and I guess you for sure can't describe or explain it. But talk about it . . . ? Hell, I talk about it all the time, and nobody gets on my case for bullshitting, unless it's bullshit I'm selling. What I usually talk about is the way it sometimes happens when the music comes together so tight and strong, it takes over and sets you down somewhere you don't expect. Like this one night at the Village Vanguard, with Papa John Duvall and Ensemble, featuring Craig Reitz (yours truly) on drugs and guitar, Sammy Baker on drums, Malo (no last name) on bass, and Eddie Di Massa on keyboards.

Eddie's the misfit of the group. It isn't that he's white . . . we're nowhere near color-coordinated. I'm white, too, and Baker's a funky tawny yellow with reddish freckles, and Malo's Puerto Rican brown and Papa John, he's blacker than midnight in Dahomey, shiny mineral black, with his shirt collar two sizes too big until he starts blowing and then his neck expands so much that flaps of inflated skin bulge out and over, like a monster voodoo frog. He's a scary man, is Papa John. Where he points his finger, a shadow forms. I get the notion that he's sort of a spiritual transsexual, that he was ticketed to be the god of a little side-pocket dimension, Club Void, which was intended to be a storehouse of music, but shipping screwed up and here he comes out of ol' Mama Duvall, squalling a blues in E flat, telling her to send him back, 'cause this human shit is fucking up his concentration. . . . But I was talking about Eddie, about how he's the misfit of the bunch.

In build and facial structure he resembles the guy who played Radar on "M*A*S*H," and he wears baggy jeans or corduroys, and long-sleeved dress shirts with the sleeves buttoned, and occasionally a string tie. Judging by his appearance, you figure he should be a computer hack or a math professor, but around the eighth grade he got barnacled to this dusty out-of-tune Baldwin, and he hasn't looked up from the keys a whole lot since. Aside from being your basic nerd, he's a hypochondriac. Should his foot fall asleep, he worries about cancer of the big toe or arterial sclerosis. He claims that his hearing is failing, and he performs in this huge set of pink headphones that adds a touch of Easter Bunny to his already cute pudginess. But what most sets him apart is that he's a follower and the rest of us are leader types, guys who're commonly mentioned when people talk about who's the best on their particular instrument. Being mentioned as a top gun in jazz means that you're into attacking your instrument, redefining its purpose or at least modifying that purpose. Eddie's happy just filling in the missing piece of the puzzle, occupying whatever space we leave, and he's too conservative to be a maniac with his ax, content to explore the nooks and crannies of its traditional limits (Not that he's academic with his music; he brings it

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from all the right sources: heart, brain, and balls). But though he's never considered "the best," you won't find anybody who won't admit that he's among the best, and that's sufficient praise, if you consider how many monkeys are out there diddling the 88s. And there was this one night, a snowy blustery Friday night at the Village Vanguard, when Eddie filled in the missing piece of the music with such absolute perfection, as far as I'm concerned he made the Hall of Fame.

It was late in the last set, we were sliding out of Papa John's classic, "Bad Ax," noodling around instead of breaking to start a new tune, just seeing if any ideas would come, and I was doing a fast-fingered little brightness, when Papa John gives me a scowl, like he's saying, Man, is that all you got, that glib, zippety trickle of elevator music? Shit! And he blows an indigo smoke up from his bottomland, a cold dark twist of sound that turns into a bronze mountain rising from a lake of chrome, with lightnings twisting like blue-white cobras on either side, and within there's a woman with ruby eyes and skin that's cool and dry like a snake's, and she's dreaming up a whole new pain of a world for you to endure. Oh, yeah, I say, and I make a dazzle out of three green-and-gold chords, then draw a line of fire out of the flash that starts forking this way and that, like an evil charge seeking a human ground, and Malo charms a blacksnake slither of goose-pebbly rhythm out of his bass, sends it tunneling through the female air, looking for the lowest hole in the universe, where it can coil up and brood for eternity, and Baker chips in with sizzling brass spatters and firecracker nervous system messages on his snare and a drunken giant's tapping his bass foot on the hollow floor of heaven, trying to think up the ultimate meanness. And there we are, almost somewhere incredible, on the edge of a perfect music, a kind of transport that—if we can just put the final piece into place—might really open up the channels, and that's at the heart of why we're all players. Oh, we've got other reasons. Because we're none of us the sort to hold down a day job, because it just happened we ended up here, because music—or creativity, rather—is a great excuse for screwing up our lives, which we would probably have done anyway. But the last reason, the reason that keeps us going on with it, that inspires and destroys, is that sometimes we can say things to one another nobody else can hear or know, not even the audiences, who understand that something's happening, understand the power and beauty of the speech and ideas, but no more than they might from listening to poets in a foreign language. . . . So, we're all holding onto the feeling, the flow of the music, waiting for Eddie, and it doesn't look good, he's just finger-fucking the keyboard, making tinkles of worthless prettiness, frowning, head clamped by those dopey pink headphones, and I can sense the music decaying, the potential losing energy and cohesion. But then, just as the whole

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thing is about to collapse back into the realm of the uncreated, Eddie enters with an infusion of dark rolling chords, thunderous and sweet, a heavy sea of sound that buoys us up, seals us into the place we'd been trying to create.

In that place, that ride we took for a few minutes into each other's souls and beyond, what came clear wasn't good news. I saw the big vein pulsing in Papa John's neck, and I knew it was soon one morning going to pulse too hard and blow him out through the blackness between here and what's next, and I saw, too, how his children hated him for never being around, and how all that doing something so well had done was to make him truly unhappy. And from what he played, I understood how the dream pipes and pills were turning me into a ghost of a man, and one day would turn me into nothing, leaving me no more than a scratchy solo in some yuppie's record collection. And Malo, I saw him, too, all that street hate pointed toward one night, when he'd be bleeding from a brand new hole like a black button in his white shirt, lying in the snow, going eyes-open into the sky. And Baker, growing so old that his gold rings spun and jiggled on his shrunken fingers, hanging out with the young players, looking estimable and an ancient prince in his velvet suit, but going home to the nothing of his apartment to play the old songs on the tape deck and shiver, frightened of what was to come. And Eddie, aw Eddie, he'd get married to that skinny blonde with the Ph.D. who he'd been living with, have a kid, and then one day, because he just couldn't stand being happy, he'd imagine a disease with such pure creativity and energy that it would become real and hollow him out, leaving only a sad final music that mourned the passing of those too-short blonde years.

I knew these things the way you know the most basic elements of your life, reflex knowledge, like where to scratch and how ice feels when you spill it on your bare skin and where to look for your wallet. It seemed I had always known them, always been imbued with the sadness attached to this knowledge. And that wasn't all. Other truths began to come clear as we followed the tormented engine of Papa John's sax out through the uncharted measures of the universal music. I understood the arcana of that music, its terrible secrets and structures, its fabulous meanings, its purposes and its chaotic origins. I didn't want that knowledge. It would weight me down, kill my capacity for expression. If I couldn't unlearn or forget it, I'd never be able to play again, only to analyze and interpret. I tried to stop playing and found I couldn't. My fingers were moving with a will of their own, and my mind was unable to shift its focus from the next idea, the next evolution of melody and rhythm. We were passing through layer after layer of truth, of information. The stars were intelligent beings, there was life on other planets, the First Law of Thermodynamics was a fragment of a greater law that surfaced in the furious

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polyrhythms of Baker's drumming. And in the throbbing heart of Malo's bass line was the history of ghosts, the lore of spirits and duppies and all the nightmare lives that were not myths, un-uh, they were real, they were everywhere, breathing in the dimness above the heads of the crowd where cigarette smoke circulated with the regularity of a sluggish tide. And there was more . . . much, much more. We were on a ride like no other, tunneling through the ancillary, the approximate, and heading straight for the last, awful, absolute truth, one that dispelled all rumors and validated every fear, a truth too large to hold inside your head, a truth that would destroy you if you gave it expression . . . as we were soon to do. I made another effort to stop, but my fingers were gliding along predestined tracks and the allure of that ultimate knowledge was an undeniable attraction. I looked at the others. Papa John's eyes were showing slim white crescents beneath half-lowered lids. Baker was in a furious, head-bobbing trance, and Malo was dreamily curled around his bass, his head tucked into the join of its neck and body. Only Eddie seemed in the least alert. Hunched at the keyboard, nodding his appreciation of each statement. I sent desperate mental communications his way. No response. Something badder than God was forming in the pall of smoke beyond the stage, something like a Tibetan demon from the Bardo of No Return, something with fangs the size of Louisville Sluggers and ten slit-pupiled eyes, and this sucker wasn't no bullshit flash from the fortune in my veins, man, it was fucking real, growing more and more solid with every bar, twisting around, trying to see who was making all this noise that had waked it up, and once it found who it was, oh boy, there was gonna be some dues to pay, 'cause it had left a wake-up call for half-past the heat death of the universe, and anybody stupid enough to wreck its beauty sleep was going to get gnashed and trashed good and proper, and what the hell was anybody doing out this far, anyway . . . shit, it had been an Ice Age since the last fool had tried to get past the Guardian and straight to the core of the Soulful Truth, weird little dude with pan-pipes, you could still hear him screaming. Phantom flames were beginning to drool over the Guardian's gristly lower lip, making sizzling sounds as they, too, got more real, and if the slim brunette at the bar were to glance up, she might end up with an eyeful of fire, the flames were wisping out that close to her. But I didn't give a damn about the brunette or any of the music lovers out in the audience. I was worried about myself, about Papa John and the rest, because we were nearly there, standing on the verge of getting it on with His Ugliness. I could feel my spirit winnowing, my flesh heating up from the billows of his garbage breath, and there was not one goddamn thing I could do about it, my fingers just kept zipping along, and I said to myself, *Okay, Jesus! Here's your chance, man. I hereby accept you as my personal savior . . . now*

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do your fucking thing! Not even a whisper of the divine came to my ear. I shut my eyes. Waited. And then Eddie stopped playing. Just for a couple of beats, less time than it takes for nothing to almost happen. But it was enough. I went skittering off in a new direction, and I could feel the music dissolving, breaking apart, like a circle of skydivers letting go of each other's hands.

Afterward at the bar, Papa John says, "That was just 'bout all right, man, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," I say, lighting a joint. What had happened seemed unreal to me, fading and fading. All I could really remember was how close we'd come to something flawless, something purely and utterly itself. The rest I chalked up to my penchant for magic potions and powders.

Malo, looking depressed, says, "Felt a little slow to me, y'know."

Baker's chit-chatting with his sticks on the counter, trying to establish eye contact with the waitress with the big happy bags, and he says, "Yeah, that was fresh, man. Real fresh." Like he don't care, like he's got more and better on his mind.

Eddie's sitting on a stool, touching the underside of his wrist with two fingers, taking his pulse. Then he presses his right hand to his forehead. "Sorry I messed up at the end there," he says. "I think I gotta fever."

"Shit!" Papa John brays a raucous saxophone laugh. "Man's gotta fever! Huh!"

And we're all laughing, saying, "Damn!" and "Fuckin' Eddie!" and clapping him on the back, loving him, because he's the one who made it happen and the one who saved our ass. Ordinarily we would have let him trudge back home to his skinny blonde, but that night we steer him out into the snow, down Bleecker to the nearest bar, and buy him drink after drink, feeding him aspirin for his imaginary fever, yelling, "Is there a doctor in the house? We gotta sick man here!" It's past five o'clock before I get home to my perfect black-haired angel, and she lets me have the "Screw you!" she's been saving in her perfect mouth, and accuses me of having something on the side, and tells me she's keeping her perfect legs closed tight, and I say, "Hey, that's cool, sweet darlin'! I'll sleep on the floor with the roaches. I'll smile while they eat me alive and shine when I die,'cause I've had all the fuckin'perfect I can stand for tonight." ●

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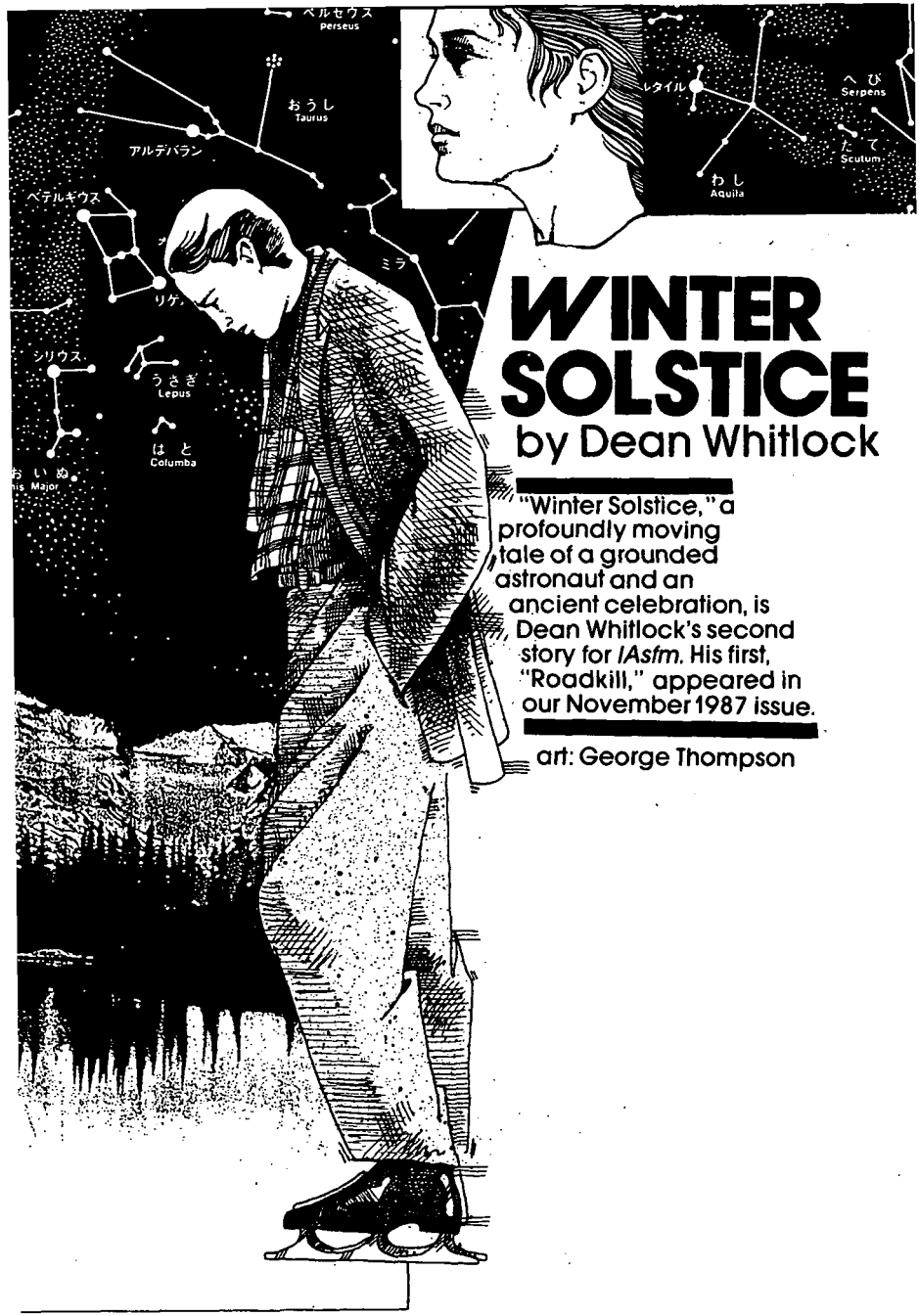

WINTER SOLSTICE

by Dean Whitlock

"Winter Solstice," a profoundly moving tale of a grounded astronaut and an ancient celebration, is Dean Whitlock's second story for *IAsfm*. His first, "Roadkill," appeared in our November 1987 issue.

art: George Thompson

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The stars were sharp, their colors clear. I let myself spin slowly and watched the patterns sweep across my faceplate. Behind me, the Earth spun, too, but I turned my back on that and watched the stars. I preferred the stars, preferred the dark silence and the crystal lights to the gaudy blue-green world below.

I was in Earth's shadow now, nighttime, the best time to see the stars. I worked the night shift for that reason, and no one minded that I put myself on spacetime rather than Eastern Standard. It meant I spent more time outside, working on the edges of the growing station, where I could float free and watch the stars and ignore the Earth below. I never got homesick. I did begrudge the trips down, mandatory leave to rebuild muscle and bone.

Not that the work was easy. Applying torque in zero gravity put strain on your body. You had no anchor, no place to put the lever. You had to think about each move, think about inertia and momentum and how to use the jets on your chair. Where to hold on, how to push. When to stop for a break so you could catch your breath, cool down, and watch the stars.

I spun back to face the big tank I was horsing into place. It was still turning slightly from the last nudge I'd given it. I scooted closer and took hold of a mounting bracket, then gently pulsed the jets on the chair till I had the tank stopped. Still holding the bracket, I pulsed the chair forward and dragged the tank toward a second, fifty meters away. I stopped it a meter shy and pulsed it around till the bracket faced its mate on the second tank. Precision movements came easy to me now.

I held a bracket in each hand and pressed the massive tanks together. I imagined a great crash as they met, and slid a retainer over the brackets before they could bounce apart. Then I scooted around to the other side to catch the brackets there and press them tight before they could twist out of line.

I set bolts through the brackets and wrenched them tight with the torque gun, then moved to the next pair of brackets, then the next. I began to sweat. Fighting the rotation of the gun was harder than moving the big tanks. Here, the chair didn't help you. I was breathing heavily, and my arms began to drag. I'd been up a long time since my last leave, pushing the regs and pushing my system. I gritted my teeth and kept working around toward the other side of the tanks, away from Earth, where I could take a break and watch the stars.

Then my hold slipped and the gun twisted me around, wrenching my arm and swinging me out from the tanks. The gun slipped off the bolt and out of my aching hand. I twisted around, trying to catch it, but the motion sent my chair into a corkscrew yaw. The stars turned slowly.

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"Rich, you all right?" The voice echoed, blurred by the pulse in my ears.

"Yeah," I muttered back. "Yeah." There was always someone watching, and no way to turn off the radio.

Breathing hard, I steadied the chair. The gun swung above me at the end of its tether. I felt an irrational surge of anger. Reached out to jerk it back. Then jerked as pain shot through my chest and up my left arm. My hand went numb. The pain moved up my neck, and my anger turned to irrational fear. I gasped, suddenly short of breath, suffocating.

"Rich?"

I had no breath to answer. The pain filled my heart and emptied my lungs, left me wheezing, choking with fear.

"Rich, are you all right?"

I lay in my suit watching the stars blur and clear, the colors flash and dim with my ragged pulse.

"Rich, we're coming. Hang on."

The stars turned slowly, patterns shifted and reformed. I saw a smile, and then a face. And then a woman, dressed in silver with star-streaming hair, who reached out her hand and glided closer. But a dark curve drew across her face. I would have cried out, but my voice was gone and now my whole arm was numb and I couldn't stop the chair from turning toward the Earth. Then my pulse surged again, and even the dark curve went black.

Winter came early that year, and it came hard. There was frost before Labor Day and snow in September. The late corn got hit and the last of the hay. Then came a string of cold, rainy weeks that soaked the ground and washed the leaves down and left the hillsides gray and the lake muddy. Mid-October looked like November and November looked like the face of the Moon.

I spent a lot of that time indoors, healing, the doctors said. I called it dying. I was thirty-eight and dying. Like the country outside. It was a heart attack, they said, and I was grounded. Stuck on Earth. Trapped at the bottom of the gravity well, with clouds between me and the stars. I might as well have been at the bottom of the lake.

When the clouds lifted, I started going outside. I walked down between the hemlocks to the lake and stood on the shore, looking at the hills on the other side, shivering while the thin sunlight faded and the sky grew black. I waited for the stars. And they came, first one, then two, then filling the clear, cold sky. I liked the North for those cold nights, when the sky was clear and clean and the stars shone as sharp as they could on Earth. So faint.

I stayed out until I couldn't stop shivering and my eyes teared in the

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deep cold. Or until May came out of the cabin and made me come back in to warm up and drink tea and do my exercises.

It didn't snow again after September. The rain-soaked ground froze hard and a lot of people lost their water. The lake started to ice over by Halloween, and by Thanksgiving, you could drive on it. People started putting out their ice houses. At night, the windows of the shanties floated above the black ice. During the day, ravens came down and fed on the bait and bits of fish left behind by the fishermen.

People down at the store remembered other bad winters, but none this cold. And none without snow. The orchards were getting hurt, they said, and next year's hay. Even the fish weren't biting too well. After the first rush out onto the ice, the fishermen began to grumble, about the cold, about the bad catch, about the lake itself. The ice is too thick, they said. The damn lake's too cold. We need clouds, and a good snow cover. They stopped going out, and more than half the shanties stood dark and empty.

I kept quiet and went out on the clear nights, to watch the stars and die.

I went back to NASA once. I had friends there, people with pull. People who outranked the doctors. I went from office to office, shaking hands, smiling, looking for a way back up. No one had anything to offer but pity. I finally wound up talking to the director.

"Frank," I said. "I'm okay. It's been four months and I'm ticking like a clock. I'm ready to go back up."

He didn't even try to smile.

"I can't send you, Rich," he said. "You're too big a risk."

"Look, if I die, I die. I won't be the first."

"And what if somebody else dies trying to save you?" He shook his head, mouth tight. "Rich, if it were just your life . . . I know your record. I know how you feel about ground duty. But I just can't take the chance. There's duty schedules, morale, PR. Your heart attack set us back a week. Your death could kill the project."

"Come on, Frank," I said angrily.

He cut me off. "Damn it, I spent two days testifying in Congress about you. They wanted to know why you were up there in the first place. They questioned our screening, our training, our work schedules. It didn't help that you were past due for down time. Way past due."

"I'll be more careful. I've learned, believe me."

"No, Rich."

"Frank, I'm healthy. My tests—"

"No."

Finally, I started pleading. "Frank, I'm dying down here. I've got to get back up. I've got to get this weight off me. I've got to see the stars."

But he shook his head again, all patience gone. "Hell, get yourself a

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telescope. Get a degree. When the station's operational, we'll be sending civilians up for research all the time, and to hell with physicals. Right now, there's nothing I can do for you."

Get a telescope.

I got a gun instead, a little .22 that hid in my coat pocket without a bulge. I got a box of varmint shells, the kind that mushroom like a dum-dum when they hit. And I went back North to the cold, clear nights and the lake.

And that night, for the first time, May came out with me. She followed me out, throwing on her coat, and walked by me down to the shore. Maybe she read my mood. I don't know, but there was nothing I could think of to say to keep her away. So we stood by the lake and looked up together at the brightening stars.

"What was it like, Rich?" she asked.

How do you find words? I took her hand and led her out onto the lake. The ice was smooth and black, and we had to walk in small sliding steps to keep from falling. I took her out to the center of our cove, half a mile from the few houses and away from the shanties. We stood in the center of a black hole. The stars shone above us and sparkled faintly in the ice below.

She shivered. "Like this?" she asked.

"No," I said. "Add ten times more stars ten times brighter, with colors ten times more clear. Then float free, with no weight on your legs, no ice pressing your feet."

She looked up at the sky with me. Then she said, "I can't imagine that."

She put her arm around me. May was my sister. She had the same sharp nose, the same dark eyes, the same black hair. But she hadn't been in space. I let my arm rest on her shoulder, but I couldn't find the warmth to hold her. She shivered again.

"Is it as cold as this?" she asked.

"The suit keeps it out."

"I meant the sky, I guess. Or the lake. The blackness. It gives me the creeps a little to be out here."

"The ice is two feet thick," I said.

"I don't like walking on something I can't see."

I looked down. The black ice disappeared into black hillsides, the hillsides into sky. The stars weren't bright enough to light the ice. We hung in space. My heart beat faster and it felt good to let it. I looked back up at the stars.

"You wouldn't make it in space, May," I told her.

"There's enough for me to do here."

"Playing nursey to me?"

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"For a while. It's nice to have you back."

"It's not nice to be back." She stiffened, but she kept her arm around me. "It's not you," I said. "It's Earth. You've got enough to do here, but I've got nothing."

"You haven't looked very hard for something to do." She dropped her arm and stood away from me.

"I know what's here. Why do you think I left? The Earth is dying, May. My future's in space."

"Not any more." Her voice was hard, a sharp change from the quiet sympathy she'd given me in the past months. I answered her just as sharply.

"What is this, shock therapy?"

"Just a little reality. You've got the rest of your life to spend here."

"For as long as it lasts."

"Damn it, you're as healthy as I am. The doctors just can't risk your heart on the shuttle again."

"I know what the doctors said. Fifteen other people just told me the same thing."

And we had nothing else to say to each other. After a minute, she turned and walked away. She was invisible in ten steps.

The ice boomed, a deep hollow sound that rolled across the lake and through my feet. I imagined the ice growing thicker as the cold settled deeper into the dark water below, slowly reaching down till it shifted some fatal balance and cracked. Freezing deeper till there was no water left and the lake died.

I watched the stars turning overhead, shivering in little fits that grew longer till I couldn't stop. But I stayed until I saw the eastern stars begin to fade. Moonrise. Then I slipped my hand into my pocket and turned and walked in sliding steps out of the cove toward the center of the lake. The pistol was ice cold, even through my glove.

I was halfway out when a tiny light flicked on in front of me and bobbed sharply in short arcs. I jerked back and almost fell on the ice. Then the light stopped swinging and my heart slowed and the shivering started up again.

I walked closer and saw it was a flashlight bulb mounted on the spring rod at the end of a tip-up. The other end passed down through a wooden x into a clean round hole in the ice. The hole was already glazed over, but fish line paid slowly off of the reel on the tip-up and down through a tiny hole in the new ice. A tug on the line had released the spring rod and set the light bobbing.

I looked around, but there were no shanties nearby, and no houses on the near shore except our cabin. The lake boomed again, but no one called across the ice to claim his catch.

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I bent down to pull the tip-up out of the water, but the ice held it. I twisted it gently, and it came loose. When I pulled it out, I felt weight at the end of the line, a grudging pull back from the fish hooked in the cold water. I started reeling in. The fish pulled again, not hard, but a steady resistance, enough to make the line vibrate. Tiny drops sprayed off and froze as they fell.

The resistance grew as I reeled in more line, and I thought the fish was fighting harder. But then the line stopped with a sudden jerk, stuck. I lowered the tip-up to the ice, reeling in to keep pressure on the line. Then I knelt by the hole and looked in. The rising moon cast more reflection than light, but I saw the long, narrow snout of a pickerel hard up against the ice. The hook was still in its mouth, and the line led out through a pinhole. Even the gap made when I'd pulled out the tip-up had frozen over. I paid out some line, but the ice had made a cone of the original hole. The fish was wedged tight.

I tried to break the ice, first with the tip-up and then with my heel. The tip-up broke and my soft pack boots just squashed against the ice. It seemed to grow thicker with each kick. The fish stared up at me with blank eyes, mouth working against the ice. I was breathing hard and shaking with cold. I could feel the hook.

I kicked again at the ice in frustration. Then I jerked out the pistol and fired down. The first flash blinded me, but I kept shooting until I'd emptied the chamber. Then I turned and threw the useless gun far across the ice and stood rocking in the cold as the shots rang off the hillsides and faded. The ice boomed, a hollow note almost lost in the dying echoes.

My sight slowly returned, and I turned back and sank to my knees before the hole. Tiny craters marred the ice. Chips littered the black surface. And the fish stared out.

The lake boomed again. My vision narrowed. Darkness swelled from the surface of the ice, rose to surround me, till only a pinhole remained of the moonlit sky. But I pulled myself up. I was gasping for breath, cold air that dried my throat and lungs and hurt my chest. I stood, swaying, and felt the darkness tighten around me, dark hands pressing at the sides of my face. As though the ice were pulling me down into the hole with the trapped pickerel. I shook my head. Saw stars spinning faintly ahead of me. I went toward them, kicked free of the clinging dark, and left the fish to the ice.

I stayed off the lake then. I exercised harder, until the dizzy spells stopped and I could move freely without the breathless pain in my chest. One day, I bushwacked through the woods deep into the hills behind the cabin. I found a spot beside a big fir and sat in the cold while the day turned to twilight. But I couldn't see the sky clearly. The place was wrong. So I came back out, feeling my way the last mile or so. May was

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waiting with dinner. It was a strange sensation, eating food I'd never thought to taste again.

At times, I thought about buying another gun. And at nights, I still went out and stood on the shore to watch the stars. The lake boomed and muttered, but I stayed above the black ice.

Then, the week before Christmas, May gave me a pair of ice skates.

"A little early, aren't you?" I said.

"We're having a skating party tonight," she said. She laughed, a bit too brightly. "We might as well get some fun out of that lake."

I told her, "I haven't skated in years.

"It's like riding a bike," she said. "You don't forget."

"I remember what it feels like to fall."

"So go practice. And take some kindling down to the shore so we can have a fire."

She was right, you don't forget. But you do get rusty. I wobbled around on the ice for an hour before I felt comfortable. And by then my calves were aching. The lake didn't help. Sheer ice to walkers wasn't so sheer to ice skaters. There were bumps and ripples scattered over the surface, and rough mounds where the fishermen had cut their holes. The holes themselves were mostly frozen over, but some had left neat ten-inch pitfalls. And there were cracks where the lake had boomed and a plate had split off. Some were fine, narrow grooves that you could skate over at a right angle. Others were sharp ridges, pushed up when the plates ground together, and others were inches wide, jagged channels. All of them could catch a blade and send you sprawling.

But between the cracks and bumps and holes, there were wide, flat sheets perfect for skating. I rediscovered my sense of balance and raced around the shanties. The cold wind burned the back of my throat. I pumped my arms and legs, aware of the strain, defying my heart. I rattled over the bumps, and jumped the cracks and ridges, defying the lake. I fell more than once.

Finally, May called me back to the cabin, to help cook. The light was fading, but I noticed it was only three-thirty.

"It's the Solstice," she told me. "Today is the shortest day of the year. That's why we're having the party."

"To celebrate darkness?"

She laughed again. "To drive it away. We have to light a fire through the night, or darkness will win and the Earth will die."

Her voice faded on the last word and she looked away. I ignored it. We'd had that argument already.

"Sounds pretty pagan," I said. "Do we sacrifice virgins?"

She looked back, smiling again. "No. We couldn't find any."

She put together some kind of tofu dish for her vegetarian friends. I

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baked a chicken and broiled potatoes. We made hot cider, too, and mulled wine. Then people started arriving, with food and children and drink. They talked about the cold and the lake and the fishing. They talked about the President and the economy. A plump woman in a coarse wool shirt cornered me by the door and told me that the space program was wasting money that should be spent on welfare. May saved me by bringing out the ice skates.

I went out to get the fire going, while the others fussed around with dishes and bundled the children into layers of sweaters. It was deep cold that night, probably too cold to be safe. The stars were as bright as I'd seen them from Earth. The fire sparked and crackled, lighting a tiny circle of ice and shore with red shadows. The shanties were dark. There was no moon. The black lake boomed. I could believe that darkness had won, that the lake had sucked all warmth from the land and trapped it beneath the ice. The thought didn't bother me.

I heard people coming down from the cabin, and I quickly put on my skates and hobbled out over the jumbled ice by the shore. Then the ice was clear. I glided away from the fire and the voices, toward the center of the lake.

The ice rang under each blade, a long zinging sound that went higher as I went faster. The blackness was profound. The stars made it harder to see, not clearer. I bumped over rough spots and ridges, never quite falling, letting inertia and momentum hold me up. On the smooth parts, I looked up at the stars and flew. I was as free as I'd been since coming down.

I skated, I don't know, for two hours. Maybe three. Up and down the lake. Into the coves and back out to the center. Round and round in the center with my head turned up, counter flow to the turning stars. And suddenly I fell. I landed on my chest and slid, my cheek burning on the ice. My ears rang. I lay there a minute, staring stupidly at the black ice. Then my ankle started to ache.

The lake boomed then, and I thought, I must have hit a crack. It seemed like a very important idea. I crawled back along the ice, feeling with my hands, and I found it. The crack was wide and clean. It felt new. I couldn't see it, but I imagined sheer, straight sides going down to a thin seam of water that was already freezing over. I took off my glove and felt the edge with my fingers. It was sharp and smooth. I slid my hand down in, as far as my palm, as far as the width of the crack would allow. I strained down, feeling for bottom with the tip of my middle finger. I wanted to touch the cold water of the lake. But the ice was many feet thick.

Then the lake boomed again, and the ice squeezed gently against my hand and then let up. I was fascinated. The lake is breathing, I thought. So I left my hand in the crack, waiting. And the lake boomed again. The

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ice squeezed gently. Then harder. Not painfully, but firmly. And it didn't let up. And I thought, you'd better take your hand out.

But the lake boomed one more time, and the ice closed on my hand. And this time it hurt. As soon as I felt the ice move, I tried to pull my hand out. It wouldn't come. I pulled again, harder. Sharp pain filled my palm. But my hand was still stuck. I stopped pulling. I knelt there on the ice, feeling stupid and a little cold. Only a little cold then. My hand hurt, but not much. A dull ache, pressure on the bones. My fingers already felt numb.

I thought, you can try to yank your hand out again, and maybe break something. You can yell. Maybe someone is close, skating or fishing. Or you can rest here and watch the stars. The choice seemed obvious.

I shifted around till I was sitting cross-legged on the ice by the crack. I shivered a little, but I still didn't feel very cold. My hand was numb, the pain gone. I tipped my head back.

The stars turned overhead. I turned my head back and forth, trying to see the whole sky at once. The cold left me. I felt, not warm, but insulated. Untouched by the cold or the ice. I thought once, The lake has me now. I am freezing to death. But I let the thought go and watched the stars instead.

My eyes teared, blurring the sky. I tried to wipe them, but my hand wouldn't move. I used my other hand instead. But the stars blurred again, and I couldn't keep the tears from running down my cheeks and freezing where they fell on my coat. The stars softened and ran together. Patterns shifted and reformed. I saw a smile, and then a face. And then a woman with long star silver hair, hand out, moving down toward me. I tried to raise my hand to her, but it still wouldn't move. So I sat still, watching as she came near.

She glided down, below the hills, toward the black ice. The lake boomed. I felt the pressure on my hand. I saw the plates shifting, edges grinding. Darkness rose from the crack, swelling around me. But this time my vision stayed clear. The woman came, star bright, filling my eyes. And suddenly I realized she mustn't touch the ice. The lake will take her, too.

I tried to stand and felt pain start in my shoulder and pulse numbly down my arm. I fell forward on my face, arm twisting at my side. I lifted my head to shout a warning. But she was down, her foot extended to touch the ice. The darkness reached up to take her. Her foot stuck. She twisted, hair swirling across the ice, white strands stinging across my face. The ice bowed under her weight, then cracked and split. Dark surged up, gelled and froze around her. Hands covered her sparkling face.

I wrenched at my arm, pounded the ice with my free hand, trying to reach her. My skates slid out from under me, left me lying by the crack. I twisted around and kicked my heels into the ice. The sharp blades sent

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chips stinging into my face. I tore at the laces on my right skate and pried it from my foot. Then I slashed and dug at the ice around my hand. Blood splashed on the ice and froze.

Finally, a giant piece split off and my hand came free. I turned and threw the skate at the darkness, then staggered up, numb hand raised to catch her silver falling hair.

May says the snow probably saved me. The clouds came suddenly, and they brought some warmth. Like a blanket. I don't remember. I walked out of it into the firelight, with one skate gone, no gloves, and blood frozen on my face. I lost part of my hand to frostbite and one little toe. And my face burns now in the cold. But I don't remember it snowing.

The light returned in the morning, though it was hidden by snow and cloud for a while. Even the fish started biting. The world didn't die and neither did I.

When it finally cleared, and I could walk again, I went out and kicked through the snow to the shore. The lake was a white plain tracked by skis and snowmobiles. I watched the sun set over the hills and waited for the stars. I'd go back up in a minute, if I could. But I couldn't die for them. I couldn't let myself, or they wouldn't let me. They're still beautiful. They're still the future. I just have to find a different way to love them.●

A LETTER FROM POLAR MARS

After five years in the numbing hell
of Antarctica, it's just a cakewalk stroll.
The permafrost is no more forbidding
here, and the suits less bulky.
Solar panels rise like crocuses above.
True, hydroponics and recyclers work slowly,
but there's a fine crop of petty jealousies
to augment our steady diet of claustrophobia.
And voilá! on Sundays we get to leapfrog
with the superpenguins in the base pool.
Yours until Earth's a neighbor again, Raj.
PS> Amundsen and Scott wouldn't cut it here.

—Robert Frazier

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Hank Dowser'd seen him prentice boys a-plenty over the years, but never a one as fresh as this. Here was Nat Smith bent over old Picklewing's left forehoof, all set to drive in the nail, and up spoke his boy.

"Not that nail," said the blacksmith's prentice boy. "Not there."

Well, that was as fine a moment as Hank ever saw for the master to give his prentice boy a sharp cuff on the ear and send him bawling into the house. But Nat Smith just nodded, then looked at the boy.

"You think you can nail this shoe, Alvin?" asked the master. "She's a big one, this mare, but I see you got you some inches since last I looked."

"I can," said the boy.

"Now just hold your horses," said Hank Dowser. "Picklewing's my only animal, and I can't just up and buy me another. I don't want your prentice boy learning to be a farrier and making his mistakes at my poor old nag's expense." And since he was already speaking his mind so frank like, Hank just rattled right on like a plain fool. "Who's the master here, anyway?" said he.

Well, that was the wrong thing to say. Hank knew it the second the words slipped out of his mouth. You don't say Who's the master, not in front of the prentice. And sure enough, Nat Smith's ears turned red and he stood up, all six feet of him, and he said, "I'm the master here, and when I say my prentice is good enough for the job, then he's good enough, or you can take your custom to another smith."

"Now just hold your horses," said Hank Dowser.

"I *am* holding your horse," said Nat Smith. "Or at least your horse's leg. In fact your horse is leaning over on me something heavy. And now you start asking if I'm master of my own smithy."

Anybody whose head don't leak knows that riling the smith who's shoeing your horse is about as smart as provoking the bees on your way in for the honey. Hank Dowser just hoped Nat'd be somewhat easier to calm down. "Course you are," said Hank. "I meant nothing by it, except I was surprised when your prentice spoke up so smart and all."

"Well that's cause he's got him a knack," said Nat Smith. "This boy Alvin, he can tell things about the inside of a horse's hoof—where a nail's going to hold, where it's going into soft hurting flesh, that kind of thing. He's a natural farrier. And if he says to me, Don't drive that nail, well I know by now that's a nail I don't want to drive, cause it'll make the horse crazy or lame."

Hank Dowser grinned and backed off. It was a hot day, that's all, that's why tempers were so high. "I have respect for every man's knack," said Hank. "Just like I expect them to have respect for mine."

"In that case, I've held up your horse long enough," said the smith. "Here, Alvin, nail this shoe."

If the boy had swaggered or simpered or sneered, Hank would've had

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a reason to be so mad. But Prentice Alvin just hunkered down with nails in his mouth and hooked up the left forehoof. Picklewing leaned on him, but the boy was right tall, even though his face had no sign of beard yet, and he was like a twin of his master, when it come to muscle under his skin. It wasn't one minute, the horse leaning that way, before the shoe was nailed in place. Picklewing didn't so much as shiver, let alone dance the way she usually did when the nails went in. And now that Hank thought about it a little, Picklewing always *did* seem to favor that leg just a little, as if something was a mite sore inside the hoof. But she'd been that way so long Hank hardly noticed it no more.

The prentice boy stepped back out of the way, still not showing any brag at all. He wasn't doing a thing that was the tiniest bit benoctious, but Hank still felt an unreasonable anger at the boy. "How old is he?" asked Hank.

"Fourteen," said Nat Smith. "He come to me when he was eleven."

"A mite old for a prentice, wouldn't you say?" asked Hank.

"A year late in arriving, he was, because of the war with the Reds and the French—he's from out in the Wobbish country."

"Them was hard years," said Hank. "Lucky for me I was in Irrakwa the whole time. Dowsing wells for windmills the whole way along the railroad they were building. Fourteen, eh? Tall as he is, I reckon he lied about his age even so."

If the boy disliked being named a liar, he didn't show no sign of it. Which made Hank Dowser all the more annoyed. That boy was like a burr under his saddle, just made him mad whatever the boy did.

"No," said the smith. "We know his age well enough. He was born right here in Hatrack River, fourteen years ago, when his folks were passing through on their way west. We buried his oldest brother up on the hill. Big for his age though, ain't he?"

They might've been discussing a horse instead of a boy. But Prentice Alvin didn't seem to mind. He just stood there, staring right through them as if they were made of glass.

"You got four years left of his contract, then?" asked Hank.

"Till he's eighteen, that's right."

"Well, if he's already this good, I reckon he'll be buying out early and going journeyman." Hank looked, but the boy didn't brighten up at this idea, neither.

"I reckon not," said Nat Smith. "He's good with the horses, but he gets careless with the forge. Any smith can do shoes, but it takes a *real* smith to do a plow blade or a wheel tire, and a knack with horses don't help a bit with that. Why, for my masterpiece I done me an anchor! I was in Netticut at the time, mind you. There ain't much call for anchors *here*, I reckon."

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Picklewing snorted and stamped—but she didn't dance lively, the way horses do when their new shoes are troublesome. It was a good set of shoes, well shod. Even *that* made Hank mad at the prentice boy. His own anger made no sense to him. The boy had put on Picklewing's last shoe, on a leg that might have been lamed in another farrier's hands. The boy had done him *good.* So why this wrath burning just under the surface, getting worse whatever the boy did or said?

Hank shrugged off his feelings. "Well, that's work well done," he said. "And so it's time for me to do my part."

"Now, we both know a dowsing's worth more than a shoeing," said the smith. "So if you need any more work done, you know I owe it to you, free and clear."

"I *will* come back, Nat Smith, next time my nag needs shoes." And because Hank Dowser was a Christian man and felt ashamed of how he disliked the boy, he added praise for the lad. "I reckon I'll be sure to come back while this boy's still under prentice bond to you, him having the knack he's got."

The boy might as well not've heard the good words, and the master smith just chuckled. "You ain't the only one who feels like that," he said.

At that moment Hank Dowser understood something that he might've missed otherwise. This boy's knack with hooves was good for trade, and Nat Smith was just the kind of man who'd hold that boy to every day of his contract, to profit from the boy's name for clean shoeing with no horses lost by laming. All a greedy master had to do was claim the boy wasn't good at forgework or something like, then use that as a pretext to hold him fast. In the meantime the boy'd make a name for this place as the best farriery in eastern Hio. Money in Nat Smith's pocket, and nothing for the boy at all, not money nor freedom.

The law was the law, and the smith wasn't breaking it—he had the right to every day of that boy's service. But the custom was to let a prentice go as soon as he had the skill and had sense enough to make his way in the world. Otherwise, if a boy couldn't hope for early freedom, why should he work hard to learn as quick as he could, work as hard as he could? They said even the slaveowners in the Crown Colonies let their best slaves earn a little pocket money on the side, so's they could buy their freedom sometime before they died.

No, Nat Smith wasn't breaking no law, but he was breaking the custom of masters with their prentice boys, and Hank thought ill of him for it; it was a mean sort of master who'd keep a boy who'd already learned everything the master had to teach.

And yet, even knowing that it was the boy who was in the right, and his master in the wrong—even knowing that, he looked at that boy and felt a cold wet hatred in his heart. Hank shuddered, tried to shake it off.

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"You say you need a well," said Hank Dowser. "You want it for drinking or for washing or for the smithy?"

"Does it make a difference?" asked the smith.

"Well, I think so," said Hank. "For drinking you need pure water, and for washing you want water that got no disease in it. But for your work in the smithy, I reckon the iron don't give no never mind whether it cools in clear or murky water, am I right?"

"The spring up the hill is giving out, slacking off year by year," said the smith. "I need me a well I can count on. Deep and clean and pure."

"You know why the stream's going slack," said Hank. "Everybody else is digging wells, and sucking out the water before it can seep out the spring. Your well is going to be about the last straw."

"I wouldn't be surprised," said the smith. "But I can't undig their wells, and I got to have my water, too. Reason I settled here was because of the stream, and now they've dried it up on me. I reckon I could move on, but I got me a wife and three brats up at the house, and I like it here, like it well enough. So I figure I'd rather draw water than move."

Hank went on down to the stand of willows by the stream, near where it came out from under an old springhouse, which had fallen into disrepair. "Yours?" asked Hank.

"No, it belongs to old Horace Guester, him who owns the roadhouse up yonder."

Hank found him a thin willow wand that forked just right, and started cutting it out with his knife. "Springhouse doesn't get much use now, I see."

"Stream's dying, like I said. Half the time in summer there ain't enough water in it to keep the cream jars cool. Springhouse ain't no good if you can't count on it all summer."

Hank made the last slice and the willow rod pulled free. He shaved the thick end to a point and whittled off all the leaf nubs, making it as smooth as ever he could. There was some dowsers who didn't care how smooth the rod was, just broke off the leaves and left the ends all raggedy, but Hank knew that the water didn't always want to be found, and then you needed a good smooth willow wand to find it. There was others used a clean wand, but always the same one, year after year, place after place, but that wasn't no good neither, Hank knew, cause the wand had to be from willow or, sometimes, hickory that grew up sucking the water you were hoping to find. Them other dowsers were mountebanks, though it didn't do no good to say so. They found water most times because in most places if you dig down far enough there's *bound* to be water. But Hank did it right, Hank had the true knack. He could feel the willow wand trembling in his hands, could feel the water singing to him under the ground. He didn't just pick the first sign of water, either. He was looking

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for clear water, high water, close to the surface and easy to pull. He took *pride* in his work.

But it wasn't like that prentice boy—what was his name?—Alvin. Wasn't like him. Either a man could nail horseshoes without ever laming the horse, or he couldn't. If he *ever* lamed a horse, folks thought twice before they went to that farrier again. But with a dowser, it didn't seem to make no difference if you found water every time or not. If you called yourself a dowser and had a forked stick, folks would pay you for dowsing wells, without bothering to find out if you had any knack for it at all.

Thinking that, Hank wondered if maybe that was why he hated this boy so much—because the boy already had a name for his good work, while Hank got no fame at all even though he was the only true dowser likely to pass through these parts in a month of Sundays.

Hank set down on the grassy bank of the stream and pulled off his boots. When he leaned to set the second boot on a dry rock where it wouldn't be so like to fill up with bugs, he saw two eyes blinking in the shadows inside a thick stand of bushes. It gave him such a start, cause he thought to see a bear, and then he thought to see a Red man hankering after dowser's scalp, even though both such was gone from these parts for years. No, it was just a little light-skinned pickaninny hiding in the bushes. The boy was a mixup, half-White, half-Black, that was plain to see once Hank got over the surprise. "What're you looking at?" demanded Hank.

The eyes closed and the face was gone. The bushes wiggled and whispered from something crawling fast.

"Never you mind him," said Nat Smith. "That's just Arthur Stuart."

Arthur Stuart! Not a soul in New England or the United States but knew that name as sure as if they lived in the Crown Colonies. "Then you'll be glad to hear that I'm the Lord Protector," said Hank Dowser. "Cause if the King be that partickler shade of skin, I got some news that'll get me three free dinners a day in any town in Hio and Suskwahenny till the day I die."

Nat laughed brisk at that idea. "No, that's Horace Guester's joke, naming him that way. Horace and Old Peg Guester, they're raising that boy, seeing how his natural ma's too poor to raise him. Course I don't think that's the whole reason. Him being so light-skinned, her husband, Mock Berry, you can't blame him if he don't like seeing that child eat at table with his coal-black children."

Hank Dowser started pulling off his stockings. "You don't suppose old Horace Guester took him in on account of he's the party responsible for causing the boy's skin to be so light."

"Hush your mouth with a pumpkin, Hank, before you say such a thing," said Nat. "Horace ain't that kind of a man."

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"You'd be surprised who I've known turn out to be that kind of a man," said Hank. "Though I don't think it of Horace Guester, mind."

"Do you think Old Peg Guester'd let a half-Black bastard son of her husband into the house?"

"What if she didn't know?"

"She'd know. Her daughter Peggy used to be torch here in Hatrack River. And everybody knowed that Little Peggy Guester never told a lie."

"I used to hear tell about the Hatrack River torch, afore I ever come here. How come I never seen her?"

"She's gone, that's why," said Nat. "Left three years ago. Just run off. You'd be wise never to ask about her up to Guesters' roadhouse. They're a mite ticklish on the subject."

Barefoot now, Hank Dowser stood up on the bank of the stream. He happened to glance up, and there off in the trees, just a-watching him, stood that Arthur Stuart boy again. Well, what harm could a little pickaninny do? Not a bit.

Hank stepped into the stream and let the ice cold water pour over his feet. He spoke silently to the water: I don't mean to block your flow, or slack you down even further. The well I dig ain't meant to do you no harm. It's like giving you another place to flow through, like giving you another face, more hands, another eye. So don't you hide from me, Water. Show me where you're rising up, pushing to reach the sky, and I'll tell them to dig there, and set you free to wash over the earth, you just see if I don't.

"This water pure enough?" Hank asked the smith.

"Pure as it can be," said Nat. "Never heard of nobody taking sick from it."

Hank dipped the sharp end of the wand into the water, upstream of his feet. Taste it, he told the wand. Catch the flavor of it, and remember, and find me more just this sweet.

The wand started to buck in his hands. It was ready. He lifted it from the stream; it settled down, calmer, but still shaking just the least bit, to let him know it was alive, alive and searching.

Now there was no more talking, no more thinking. Hank just walked, eyes near closed because he didn't want his vision to distract from the tingling in his hands. The wand never led him astray; to *look* where he was going would be as much as to admit the wand had no power to find.

It took near half an hour. Oh, he found a few places right off, but not good enough, not for Hank Dowser. He could tell by how sharp the wand bucked and dropped whether the water was close enough to the surface to do much good. He was so good at it now that most folks couldn't make no difference between him and a doodlebug, which was about as fine a

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knack as a dowser could ever have. And since doodlebugs were right scarce, mostly being found among seventh sons or thirteenth children, Hank never wished anymore that he was a doodlebug instead of just a dowser, or not often, anyway.

The wand dropped so hard it buried itself three inches deep in the earth. Couldn't do much better than that. Hank smiled and opened his eyes. He wasn't thirty feet back of the smithy. Couldn't have found a better spot with his eyes open. No doodlebug could've done a nicer job.

The smith thought so, too. "Why, if you'd asked me where I wished the well would be, this is the spot I'd pick."

Hank nodded, accepting the praise without a smile, his eyes half-closed, his whole body still a-tingle with the strength of the water's call to him. "I don't want to lift this wand," said Hank, "till you've dug a trench all around this spot to mark it off."

"Fetch a spade!" cried the smith.

Prentice Alvin jogged off in search of the tool. Hank noticed Arthur Stuart toddling after, running full tilt on them short legs so awkward he was bound to fall. And fall he did, flat down on his face in the grass, moving so fast he slid a yard at least, and came up soaking wet with dew. Didn't pause him none. Just waddled on around the smithy building where Prentice Alvin went.

Hank turned back to Nat Smith and kicked at the soil just underfoot. "I can't be sure, not being a doodlebug," said Hank, as modest as he could manage, "but I'd say you won't have to dig ten feet till you strike water here. It's fresh and lively as I ever seen."

"No skin off my nose either way," said Nat. "I don't aim to dig it."

"That prentice of yours looks strong enough to dig it hisself, if he doesn't lazy off and sleep when your back is turned."

"He ain't the lazying kind," said Nat. "You'll be staying the night at the roadhouse, I reckon."

"I reckon not," said Hank. "I got some folks about six mile west who want me to find them some *dry* ground to dig a good deep cellar."

"Ain't that kind of *anti*-dowsing?"

"It is, Nat, and it's a whole lot harder, too, in wettish country like this."

"Well, come back this way, then," said Nat, "and I'll save you a sip of the first water pulled up from your well."

"I'll do that," said Hank, "and gladly." That was an honor he wasn't often offered, that first sip from a well. There was a power in that, but only if it was freely given, and Hank couldn't keep from smiling now. "I'll be back in a couple of days, sure as shooting."

The prentice boy come back with the spade and set right to digging. Just a shallow trench, but Hank noticed that the boy squared it off

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without measuring, each side of the hole equal, and as near as Hank could guess, it was true to the compass points as well. Standing there with the wand still rooted in the ground, Hank felt a sudden sickness in his stomach, having the boy so close. Only it wasn't the kind of sickness where you hanker to chuck up what you ate for breakfast. It was the kind of sickness that turns to pain, the sickness that turns to violence; Hank felt himself yearning to snatch the spade out of the boy's hands and smack him across the head with the sharp side of the blade.

Till finally it dawned on him, standing there with the wand a-trembling in his hand. It wasn't *Hank* who hated this boy, no sir. It was the *water* that Hank served so well, the *water* that wanted this boy dead.

The moment that thought entered Hank's head, he fought it down, swallowed back the sickness inside him. It was the plain craziest idea that ever entered his head. Water was water. All it wanted was to come up out of the ground or down out of the clouds and race over the face of the earth. It didn't have no malice in it. No desire to kill. And anyway, Hank Dowser was a Christian, and a Baptist to boot—a natural dowser's religion if there ever was one. When he put folks under the water, it was to baptize them and bring them to Jesus, not to drownd them. Hank didn't have murder in his heart, he had his Savior there, teaching him to love his enemies, teaching him that even to hate a man was like murder.

Hank said a silent prayer to Jesus to take this rage out of his heart and make him stop wishing for this innocent boy's death.

As if in answer, the wand leapt right out of the ground, flew clear out of his hands and landed in the bushes most of two rods off.

That never happened to Hank in all his days of dowsing. A wand taking off like that! Why, it was as if the water had spurned him as sharp as a fine lady spurns a cussing man.

"Trench is all dug," said the boy.

Hank looked sharp at him, to see if he noticed anything funny about the way the wand took off like that. But the boy wasn't even looking at him. Just looking at the ground inside the square he'd just ditched off.

"Good work," said Hank. He tried not to let his voice show the loathing that he felt.

"Won't do no good to dig here," said the boy.

Hank couldn't hardly believe his ears. Bad enough the boy sassing his own master, in the trade he knew, but what in tarnation did this boy know about dowsing?

"What did you say, boy?" asked Hank.

The boy must have seen the menace in Hank's face, or caught the tone of fury in his voice, because he backed right down. "Nothing, sir," he said. "None of my business anyhow."

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Such was Hank's built-up anger, though, that he wasn't letting the boy off so easy. "You think you can do my job too, is that it? Maybe your master lets you think you're as good as he is cause you got your knack with *hooves,* but let me tell you, boy, I am a true dowser and my wand tells me there's water here!"

"That's right," said the boy. He spoke mildly, so that Hank didn't really notice that the boy had four inches on him in height and probably more than that in reach. Prentice Alvin wasn't so big you'd call him a giant, but you wouldn't call him no dwarf, neither.

"That's *right?* It ain't for you to say right or wrong to what my wand tells me!"

"I know it, sir, I was out of turn."

The smith came back with a wheelbarrow, a pick, and two stout iron levers. "What's all this?" he asked.

"Your boy here got smart with me," said Hank. He knew as he said it that it wasn't quite fair—the boy had already apologized, hadn't he?

Now at last Nat's hand lashed out and caught the boy a blow like a bear's paw alongside his head. Alvin staggered under the cuffing, but he didn't fall. "I'm sorry, sir," said Alvin.

"He said there wasn't no water here, where I said the well should be." Hank just couldn't stop himself. "I had respect for *his* knack. You'd think he'd have respect for mine."

"Knack or no knack," said the smith, "he'll have respect for my customers or he'll learn how long it takes to be a smith, oh sir! He'll learn."

Now the smith had one of the heavy iron levers in his hand, as if he meant to cane the boy across the back with it. That would be sheer murder, and Hank hadn't the heart for it. He held out his hand and caught the end of the lever. "No, Nat, wait, it's all right. He did tell me he was sorry."

"And is that enough for you?"

"That and knowing you'll listen to me and not to him," said Hank. "I'm not so old I'm ready to hear boys with hoof-knacks tell me I can't dowse no more."

"Oh, the well's going to be dug right here, you can bet your life. And this boy's going to dig it all himself, and not have a bite to eat until he strikes water."

Hank smiled. "Well, then, he'll be glad to discover that I know what I'm doing—he won't have to dig far, that's for sure."

Nat rounded on the boy, who now stood a few yards off, his hands slack at his side, showing no anger on his face, nothing at all, really. "I'm going to escort Mr. Dowser back to his new-shod mare, Alvin. And this is the last I want to see of you until you can bring me a bucket of clean

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water from this well. You won't eat a bit or have a sip of water until you drink it from here!"

"Oh, now," said Hank, "have a heart. You know it takes a couple of days sometimes for the dirt to settle out of a new well."

"Bring me a bucket of water from the new well, anyway;" said Nat. "Even if you work all night."

They headed back for the smithy then, to the corral where Picklewing waited. There was some chat, some work at saddling up, and then Hank Dowser was on his way, his nag riding smoother and easier under him, just as happy as a clam. He could see the boy working as he rode off. There wasn't no flurry of dirt, just methodical lifting and dumping, lifting and dumping. The boy didn't seem to stop to rest, either. There wasn't a single break in the sound of his labor as Hank rode off. The *shuck* sound of the spade dipping into the soil, then the *swish-thump* as the dirt slid off onto the pile.

Hank didn't calm down his anger till he couldn't hear a sound of the boy, or even remember what the sound was like. Whatever power Hank had as a dowser, this boy was the enemy of his knack, that much Hank knew. He had thought his rage was unreasonable before, but now that the boy had spoke up, Hank knew he had been right all along. The boy thought he was a master of water, maybe even a doodlebug, and that made him Hank's enemy.

Jesus said to give your enemy your own cloak, to turn the other cheek—but what about when your enemy aims to take away your livelihood, what then? Do you let him ruin you? Not this Christian, thought Hank. I learned that boy something this time, and if it doesn't take, I'll learn him more later.

Alvin didn't need to look up when the dowser left. He could feel where the man was as he moved along, his anger like a black noise in the midst of the sweet green music of the wood. That was the curse of being the only White, man or boy, who could feel the life of the greenwood—it meant that he was also the only White who knew how the land was dying.

Not that the soil wasn't rich—years of forest growth had made the earth so fertile that they said the *shadow* of a seed could take root and grow. There was life in the fields, life in the towns even. But it wasn't part of the land's own song. It was just noise, whispering noise, and the green of the wood, the life of the Red man, the animal, the plant, the soil all living together in harmony, that song was quiet now, intermittent, sad. Alvin heard it dying and he mourned.

Vain little dowser. Why was he so mad? Alvin couldn't figure. But he didn't press it, didn't argue, because almost as soon as the dowser came

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along, Al could see the Unmaker shadowing the edges of his vision, as if Hank Dowser'd brought him along.

Alvin first saw the Unmaker in his nightmares as a child, a vast nothingness that rolled invisibly toward him, trying to crush him, to get inside him, to grind him into pieces. It was old Taleswapper who first helped Alvin give his empty enemy a name. The Unmaker, which longs to undo the universe, break it all down until everything is flat and cold and smooth and dead.

As soon as he had a name for it and some notion what it *was,* he started seeing the Unmaker in daylight, wide awake. Not right out in the open, of course. Look *at* the Unmaker and most times you can't see him. He goes all invisible behind all the life and growth and upbuilding in the world. But at the edges of your sight, as if he was sneaking up behind, that's where the sly old snake awaited, that's where Alvin saw him.

When Alvin was a boy he learned a way to make that Unmaker step back a ways and leave him be. All he had to do was use his hands to build something. It could be as simple as weaving grass into a basket, and he'd have some peace. So when the Unmaker showed up around the blacksmith's shop not long after Alvin got there, he wasn't too worried. There was plenty of chance for making things in the smithy. Besides, the smithy was full of fire—fire and iron, the hardest earth. Alvin knew from childhood on that the Unmaker hankered after water. Water was its servant, did most of its work, tearing things down. So it was no wonder that when a water man like Hank Dowser came along, the Unmaker freshened up and got lively.

Now, though, Hank Dowser was on his way, taking his anger and his unfairness with him, but the Unmaker was still there, hiding out in the meadow and the bushes, lurking in the long shadows of the evening.

Dig with the shovel, lever up the earth, hoist it to the lip of the well, dump it aside. A steady rhythm, a careful building of the pile, shaping the sides of the hole. Square the first three feet of the hole, to set the shape of the well house. Then round and gently tapered inward for the stonework of the finished well. Even though you know this well will never draw water, do it careful, dig as if you thought that it would last. Build smooth, as near to perfect as you can, and it'll be enough to hold that sly old spy at bay.

So why didn't Alvin feel a speck more brave about it?

Alvin knew it was getting on toward evening, sure as if he had him a watch in his pocket, cause here came Arthur Stuart, his face just scrubbed after supper, sucking on a horehound and saying not a word. Alvin was used to him by now. Almost ever since the boy could walk, he'd been like Alvin's little shadow, coming every day it didn't rain. Never had much to say, and when he did it wasn't too easy to understand

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his baby talk—he had trouble with his *R*s and *S*s. Didn't matter. Arthur never wanted nothing and never did no harm, and Alvin usually half-forgot the boy was around.

Digging there with the evening flies out, buzzing in his face, Alvin had nothing to do with his brain but think. Three years he been in Hatrack, and all that time he hadn't got him one inch closer to knowing what his knack was for. He hardly used it, except for the bit he done with the horses, and that was cause he couldn't bear to know how bad they suffered when it was so easy a thing for him to make the shoeing go right. That was a good thing to do, but it didn't amount to much up-building, compared to the ruination of the land all around him.

The White man was the Unmaker's tool in this forest land, Alvin knew that, better even than water at tearing things down. Every tree that fell, every badger, coon, deer, and beaver that got used up without consent, each death was part of the killing of the land. Used to be the Reds kept the balance of things, but now they were gone, either dead or moved west of the Mizzipy—or, like the Irrakwa and the Cherriky, turned White at heart, sleeves rolled up and working hard to unmake the land even faster than the White. No one left to try to keep things whole.

Sometimes Alvin thought he was the only one left who hated the Unmaker and wanted to build against him. And he didn't know how to do it, didn't have any idea what the next step ought to be. The torch who touched him at his birthing, she was the only one who might've taught him how to be a true Maker, but she was gone, run off the very morning that he came. Couldn't be no accident. She just didn't want to teach him aught. He had a destiny, he knew it, and not a soul to help him find the way.

I'm willing, thought Alvin. I got the power in me, when I can figure how to use it straight, and I got the desire to be whatever it is I'm meant to be, but somebody's got to teach me.

Not the blacksmith, that was sure. Profiteering old coot. Alvin knew that Nat Smith tried to teach him as little as he could. Even now Alvin reckoned Nat didn't know half how much Alvin had learned himself just by watching when his master didn't guess that he was alert. Old Nat never meant to let him go if he could help it. Here I got a destiny, a real honest to goodness Work to do in my life, just like the old boys in the Bible or Ulysses or Hector, and the only teacher I got is a smith so greedy I have to *steal* learning from him, even though it's mine by right.

Sometimes it burned Alvin up inside, and he got a hankering to do something spetackler to show Nat Smith that his prentice wasn't just a boy who didn't know he was being cheated. What would Nat Smith do if he saw Alvin split iron with his finger? What if he saw that Al could straighten a bent nail as strong as before, or heal up brittle iron that

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shattered under the hammer? What if he saw that Al could beat iron so thin you could see sunlight through it, and yet so strong you couldn't break it?

But that was plain dumb when Alvin thought that way, and he knowed it. Nat Smith might gasp the first time, he might even faint dead away, but inside ten minutes he'd be figuring an angle how to make money from it, and Alvin'd be less likely than ever to get free ahead of time. And his fame would spread, yes sir, so that by the time he turned nineteen and Nat Smith had to let him go, Alvin would already have too much notice. Folks'd keep him busy healing and doodlebugging and fixing and stone-shaping, work that wasn't even halfway toward what he was born for. If they brought him the sick and lame to heal, how would he ever have time to be aught but a physicker? Time enough for healing when he learned the whole way to be a Maker.

The Prophet Lolla-wossiky showed him a vision of the Crystal City only a week before the massacre at Tippy-Canoe. Alvin knew that someday in the future it was up to him to build them towers of ice and light. That was his destiny, not to be a country fixit man. As long as he was bound to Nat Smith's service, he had to keep his real knack secret.

That's why he never ran off, even though he was big enough now that nobody'd take him for a runaway prentice. What good would freedom do? He had to learn first how to be a Maker, or it wouldn't make no difference if he went or stayed.

So he never spoke of what he could do, and scarce used his gifts more than to shoe horses and feel the death of the land around him. But all the time in the back of his brain he recollected what he really was. A Maker. Whatever that is, I'm it, which is why the Unmaker tried to kill me before I was born and in a hundred accidents and almost-murders in my childhood back in Vigor Church. That's why he lurks around now, watching me, waiting for a chance to get me, waiting maybe for a time like tonight, all alone out here in the darkness, just me and the spade and my anger at having to do work that won't amount to nothing.

Hank Dowser. What kind of man won't listen to a good idea from somebody else? Sure the wand went down hard—the water was like to bust up through the earth at that place. But the reason it *hadn't* busted through was on account of a shelf of rock along there, not four feet under the soil. Why else did they think this was a natural meadow here? The big trees couldn't root, because the water that fell here flowed right off the stone, while the roots couldn't punch through the shelf of rock to get to the water underneath it. Hank Dowser could find water, but he sure couldn't find what lay *between* the water and the surface. It wasn't Hank's fault he couldn't see it, but it sure was his fault he wouldn't entertain no notion it might be there.

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So here was Alvin, digging as neat a well as you please, and sure enough, no sooner did he have the round side wall of the well defined than *clink, clank, clunk,* the spade rang against stone.

At the new sound, Arthur Stuart ran right up to the edge of the hole and looked in. "Donk donk," he said. Then he clapped his hands.

"Donk donk is right," said Alvin. "I'll be donking on solid rock the whole width of this hole. And I ain't going in to tell Nat Smith about it, neither, you can bet on that, Arthur Stuart. He told me I couldn't eat or drink till I got water, and I ain't about to go in afore dark and start pleading for supper just cause I hit rock, no sir."

"Donk," said the little boy.

"I'm digging every scrap of dirt out of this hole till the rock is bare."

He carefully dug out all the dirt he could, scraping the spade along the bumpy face of the rock. Even so, it was still brown and earthy, and Alvin wasn't satisfied. He wanted that stone to shine white. Nobody was watching but Arthur Stuart, and he was just a baby anyhow. So Alvin used his knack in a way he hadn't done since leaving Vigor Church. He made all the soil flow away from the bare rock, slide right across the stone and fetch up tight against the smooth-edge earthen walls of the hole.

It took almost no time till the stone was so shiny and white you could think it was a pool reflecting the last sunlight of the day. The evening birds sang in the trees. Sweat dripped off Alvin so fast it left little black spots when it fell on the rock.

Arthur stood at the edge of the hole. "Water," he said.

"Now you stand back, Arthur Stuart. Even if this ain't all that deep, you just stand back from holes like this. You can get killed falling in, you know."

A bird flew by, its wings rattling loud as could be. Somewhere another bird gave a frantic cry.

"Snow," said Arthur Stuart.

"It ain't snow, it's rock," said Alvin. Then he clambered up out of the hole and stood there, laughing to himself. "There's your well, Hank Dowser," Alvin said. "You ride on back here and see where your stick drove into the dirt."

He'd be sorry he got Al a blow from his master's hand. It wasn't no joke when a blacksmith hit you, specially one like his master, who didn't go easy even on a little boy, and sure not on a man-size prentice like Alvin.

Now he could go on up to the house and tell Nat Smith the well was dug. Then he'd lead his master back down here and show him this hole, with the stone looking up from the bottom, as solid as the heart of the world. Alvin heard himself saying to his master, "You show me how to

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drink that and I'll drink it." It'd be pure pleasure to hear how Nat'd cuss himself blue at the sight of it.

Except now that he could show them how wrong they were to treat him like they did, Alvin knew it didn't matter in the long run whether he taught them a lesson or not. What mattered was Nat Smith really did need this well. Needed it bad enough to pay out a dowser's cost in free ironwork. Whether it was dug where Hank Dowser said or somewhere else, Alvin knew he had to dig it.

That would suit Alvin's pride even better, now he thought of it. He'd come in with a bucket, just like Nat ordered him to—but from a well of his own choosing.

He looked around in the ruddy evening light, thinking where to start looking for a diggable spot. He heard Arthur Stuart pulling at the meadow grass, and the sound of birds having a church choir practice, they were so loud tonight.

Or maybe they were plain scared. Cause now he was looking around, Alvin could see that the Unmaker was lively tonight. By rights digging the first hole should've been enough to send it headlong, keep it off for days. Instead it followed him just out of sight, every step he took as he hunted for the place to dig the true well. It was getting more and more like one of his nightmares, where nothing he did could make the Unmaker go away. It was enough to send a thrill of fear right through him, make him shiver in the warm spring air.

Alvin just shrugged off that scare. He knew the Unmaker wasn't going to touch him. For all the years of his life till now, the Unmaker'd tried to kill him by setting up accidents, like water icing up where he was bound to step, or eating away at a riverbank so he slipped in. Now and then the Unmaker even got some man or other to take a few swipes at Alvin, like Reverend Thrower or them Choc-Taw Reds. In all his life, outside his dreams, that Unmaker never did anything direct.

And he won't now either, Alvin told himself. Just keep searching, so you can dig the *real* well. The false one didn't drive that old deceiver off, but the real one's bound to, and I won't see him shimmering at the edges of my vision for three months after that.

With that thought in mind, Alvin hunkered down and kept his mind on searching for a break in the hidden shelf of stone.

How Alvin searched things out underground wasn't like *seeing*. It was more like he had another hand that skittered through the soil and rock as fast as a waterdrop on a hot griddle. Even though he'd never met him a doodlebug, he figured doodling couldn't be much different than how he done it, sending his bug scouting along under the earth, feeling things out all the way. And if he *was* doodlebugging, then he had to wonder if folks was right who allowed as how it was the doodlebug's very *soul* that

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slithered under the ground, and there was tales about doodlebugs whose souls got lost and the doodler never said another word or moved a muscle till he finally died. But Alvin didn't let such tales scare him off from doing what he ought to. If there was a need for stone, he'd find him the natural breaks to make it come away without hardly chipping at it. If there was need for water, he'd find him a way to dig on down to get it.

Finally he found him a place where the shelf of stone was thin and crumbled. The ground was higher here, the water deeper down, but what counted was he could get to it with his spade.

This new spot was halfway between the house and the smithy—which would be less convenient for Nat, but better for his wife Gertie, who had to use the same water. Alvin set to with a will, because it was getting on to dark, and he was determined to take no rest tonight until his work was done. Without even thinking about it he made up his mind to use his power like he used to back on his father's land. He never struck stone with his spade; it was like the earth turned to flour and fair to jumped out of the hole instead of him having to heft it. If any grownup happened to see him right then they'd think they was likkered up or having a conniption fit, he dug so fast. But nobody was looking, except for Arthur Stuart. It was getting nightward, after all, and Al had no lantern, so nobody'd ever even notice he was there. He could use his knack tonight without fear of being found out.

From the house came the sound of shouting, loud but not clear enough for Alvin to make out the words.

"Mad," said Arthur Stuart. He was looking straight at the house, as steady as a dog on a point.

"Can you hear what they're saying?" said Alvin. "Old Peg Guester always says you got ears like a dog, perk up at everything."

Arthur Stuart closed his eyes. "You got no right to starve that boy," he said.

Alvin like to laughed outright. Arthur was doing as perfect an imitation of Gertie Smith's voice as he ever heard.

"He's too big to thrash and I got to learn him," said Arthur Stuart.

This time he sounded just like Alvin's master. "I'll be," murmured Alvin.

Little Arthur went right on. "Either Alvin eats this plate of supper Nat Smith or you'll wear it on your head. I'd like to see you try it you old hag I'll break your arms."

Alvin couldn't help himself, he just laughed outright. "Consarn it if you ain't a perfect mockingbird, Arthur Stuart."

The little boy looked up at Alvin and a grin stole across his face. Down from the house come the sound of breaking crockery. Arthur Stuart

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started to laugh and run around in circles. "Break a dish, break a dish, break a dish!" he cried.

"If you don't beat all," said Alvin. "Now you tell me, Arthur, you didn't really understand all them things you just said, did you? I mean, you were just repeating what you heard, ain't that so?"

"Break a dish on his *head*!" Arthur screamed with laughter and fell over backward in the grass. Alvin laughed right along, but he couldn't take his eyes off the little boy. More to him than meets the eye, thought Alvin. Or else he's plain crazy.

From the other direction came another woman's voice, a full-throated call that floated over the moist darkening air. "Ar*thur*! Arthur *Stuart*!"

Arthur sat right up. "Mama," he said.

"That's right, that's Old Peg Guester calling," said Alvin.

"Go to bed," said Arthur.

"Just be careful she don't give you a bath first, boy, you're a mite grimy."

Arthur got up and started trotting off across the meadow, up to the path that led from the springhouse to the roadhouse where he lived. Alvin watched him out of sight, the little boy flapping his arms as he ran, like as if he was flying. Some bird, probably an owl, flew right alongside the boy halfway across the meadow, skimming along the ground like as if to keep him company. Not till Arthur was out of sight behind the springhouse did Alvin turn back to his labor.

In a few more minutes it was full dark, and the deep silence of night came quick after that. Even the dogs were quiet all through town. It'd be hours before the moon came up. Alvin worked on. He didn't have to see; he could feel how the well was going, the earth under his feet. Nor was it the Red man's seeing now, their gift for hearing the greenwood song. It was his own knack he was using, helping him feel his way deeper into the earth.

He knew he'd strike rock twice as deep this time. But when the spade caught up on big chunks of rock, it wasn't a smooth plate like it was at the spot Hank Dowser chose. The stones were crumbly and broke up, and with his knack Al hardly had to press his lever afore the stones flipped up easy as you please, and he tossed them out the well like clods.

Once he dug through that layer, though, the ground got oozy underfoot. If he wasn't who he was, he'd've had to set the work aside and get help to dredge it out in the morning. But for Alvin it was easy enough. He tightened up the earth around the walls of the hole, so water couldn't seep in so fast. It wasn't spadework now. Alvin used a dredge to scoop up the mucky soil, and he didn't need no partner to hoist it out on a rope, either, he just heaved it up and his knack was such that each scoop of

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ooze clung together and landed neat as you please outside the well, just like he was flinging bunny rabbits out the hole.

Alvin was master here, that was sure, working miracles in this hole in the ground. You tell me I can't eat or drink till the well is dug, thinking you'll have me begging for a cup of water and pleading for you to let me go to bed. Well, you won't see such a thing. You'll have your well, with walls so solid they'll be drawing water here after your house and smithy have crumbled into dust.

But even as he felt the sweet taste of victory, he saw that the Unmaker was closer than it had ever come in years. It flickered and danced, and not just at the edges of his vision anymore. He could see it right in front of him, even in the darkness, he could see it clearer than ever in daylight, cause now he couldn't see nothing real to distract him.

It was scary, all of a sudden, just like the nightmares of his childhood, and for a while Alvin stood in the hole, all froze with fear, as water oozed up from below, making the ground under him turn to slime. Thick slime a hundred feet deep, he was sinking down, and the walls of the well were getting soft, too, they'd cave in on him and bury him, he'd drownd trying to breathe muck into his lungs, he knew it, he could feel it cold and wet around his thighs, his crotch; he clenched his fists and felt mud ooze between his fingers, just like the nothingness in all his nightmares—

And then he came to himself, got control. Sure, he was up to his waist in mud, and if he was any other boy in such a case he might have wiggled himself down deeper and smothered hisself, trying to struggle out. But this was Alvin, not some ordinary boy, and he was safe as long as he wasn't booglied up by fear like a child caught in a bad dream. He just made the slime under his feet harden enough to hold his weight, then made the hard place float upward, lifting him out of the mud until he was standing on gravelly mud at the bottom of the well.

Easy as breaking a rat's neck. If that was all the Unmaker could think of doing, it might as well go on home. Alvin was a match for him, just like he was a match for Nat Smith and Hank Dowser both. He dug on, dredged up, hoisted, flung, then bent to dredge again.

He was pretty near deep enough now, a good six feet lower than the stone shelf. Why, if he hadn't firmed up the earthen sides of the well, it'd be full of water over his head already. Alvin took hold of the knotted rope he left dangling and walked up the wall, pulling himself hand over hand up the rope.

The moon was rising now, but the hole was so deep it wouldn't shine into the well until near moon-noon. Never mind. Into the pit Alvin dumped the barrowload of the stones he'd levered out only an hour before. Then he clambered down after it.

He'd been working rock with his knack since he was little, and he was

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never more sure-handed with it than tonight. With his bare hands he shaped the stone like soft clay, making it into smooth square blocks that he placed all around the walls of the well from the bottom up, braced firm against each other so that the pushing of soil and water wouldn't cave it in. Water would seep easily through the cracks between stones, but the soil wouldn't, so the well would be clean almost from the start.

There wasn't enough stone from the well itself, of course; Alvin made three more trips to the stream to load the barrow with water-smoothed rocks. Even though he was using his knack to make the work easier, it was late at night and weariness was coming on him. But he refused to pay attention. Hadn't he learned the Red man's knack for running on long after weariness should have claimed him? A boy who followed Ta-Kumsaw, running without a rest from Detroit to Eight-Face Mound, such a boy had no need to give in to a single night of well-digging, and never mind his thirst or the pain in his back and thighs and shoulders, the ache of his elbows and his knees.

At last, at last, it was done. The moon past zenith, his mouth tasting like a horsehair blanket, but it was done. He climbed on out of the hole, bracing himself against the stone walls he'd just finished building. As he climbed he let go of his hold on the earth around the well, unsealed it, and the water, now tame, began to trickle noisily into the deep stone basin he'd built to hold it.

Still Alvin didn't go inside the house, didn't so much as walk to the stream and drink. His first taste of water would be from this well, just like Nat Smith had said. He'd stay here and wait until the well had reached its natural level, and then clear the water and draw up a bucket and carry it inside the house and drink a cup of it in front of his master. Afterward he'd take Nat Smith outside and show him the well Hank Dowser called for, the one Nat Smith had cuffed him for, and then point out the one where you could drop a bucket and it was splash, not clatter.

He stood there at the lip of the well, imagining how Nat Smith would sputter, how he'd cuss. Then he sat down, just to ease his feet, picturing Hank Dowser's face when he saw what Al had done. Then he lay right down to ease his aching back, and closed his eyes for just a minute, so he didn't have to pay no heed to the fluttering shadows of unmaking that kept pestering him out the corners of his eyes.

Alvin woke up hours later, the moon low in the west, the first scant light appearing in the east. He hadn't meant to sleep. But he was tired, after all, and his work was done, so of course he couldn't close his eyes and hope to stay awake. There was still time to take a bucketful of water and carry it inside.

Were his eyes open even now? The sky he could see, light grey to the

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left, light grey to the right. But where were the trees? Shouldn't they have been moving gently in the morning breeze, just at the fringes of his vision? For that matter, there was no breeze; and beyond the sight of his eyes and touch of his skin, there were other things he could not feel. The green music of the living forest. It was gone; no murmur of life from the sleeping insects in the grass, no rhythm of the heartbeats of the dawn-browsing deer. No birds roosting in the trees, waiting for the sun's heat to bring out the insects.

Dead. Unmade. The forest was gone.

Alvin opened his eyes.

Hadn't they already been open?

Alvin opened his eyes again, and still he couldn't see; without closing them, he opened them still again, and each time the sky seemed darker. No, not darker, simply farther away, rushing up and away from him, like as if he was falling into a pit so deep that the sky itself got lost.

Alvin cried out in fear, and opened his already-opened eyes, and saw:

The quivering air of the Unmaker, pressing down on him, poking itself into his nostrils, between his fingers, into his ears.

He couldn't feel it, no sir, except that he knew what *wasn't* there now; the outermost layers of his skin, wherever the Unmaker touched, his own body was breaking apart, the tiniest bits of him dying, drying, flaking away.

"No!" he shouted. The shout didn't make a sound. Instead, the Unmaker whipped inside his mouth, down into his lungs, and he couldn't close his teeth hard enough, his lips tight enough to keep that slimy uncreator from slithering on inside him, eating him away from the inside out.

He tried to heal himself the way he done with his leg that time the millstone broke it clean in half. But it was like the old story Taleswapper told him. He couldn't build things up half so fast as the Unmaker could tear them down. For every place he healed, there was a thousand places wrecked and lost. He was a-going to die, he was half-gone already, and it wouldn't be just death, just losing his flesh and living on in the spirit, the Unmaker meant to eat him body and spirit both alike, his mind and his flesh together.

A splash. He heard a splashing sound. It was the most welcome thing he ever heard in his life, to hear a sound at all. It meant that there *was* something beyond the Unmaker that surrounded and filled him.

Alvin heard the sound echo and ring inside his own memory, and with that to cling to, with that touch of the real world there to hang on to, Alvin opened his eyes.

This time for real, he knew, cause he saw the sky again with its proper fringe of trees. And there was Gertie Smith, Nat's missus, standing over him with a bucket in her hands.

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"I reckon this is the first water from this well," she said.

Alvin opened his mouth, and felt cool moist air come inside. "Reckon so," he whispered.

"I never would've thought you could dig it all out and line it proper with stones, all in one night," she said. "That mixup boy, Arthur Stuart, he come to the kitchen where I was making breakfast biscuits, and he told me your well was done. I had to come and see."

"He gets up powerful early," said Alvin.

"And you stay up powerful late," said Gertie. "If I was a man your size I'd give my husband a proper licking, Al, prentice or no."

"I just did what he asked."

"I'm certain you did, just like I'm certain he wanted you to excavate that there circle of stone off by the smithy, am I right?" She cackled with delight. "That'll show the old coot. Sets such a store by that dowser, but his own prentice has a better dowsing knack than that old fraud—"

For the first time Alvin realized that the hole he dug in anger was like a signboard telling folks he had more than a hoof-knack in him. "Please, ma'am," he said.

"Please what?"

"My knack ain't dowsing, ma'am, and if you start saying so, I'll never get no peace."

She eyed him cool and steady. "If you ain't got the dowser's knack, boy, tell me how come there's clear water in this well you dug."

Alvin calculated his lie. "The dowser's stick dipped here, too, I saw it, and so when the first well struck stone, I tried here."

Gertie had a suspicious nature. "Do you reckon you'd say the same if Jesus was standing here judging your eternal soul depending on the truth of what you say?"

"Ma'am, I reckon if Jesus was here, I'd be asking forgiveness for my sins, and I wouldn't care two hoots about any old well."

She laughed again, cuffed him lightly on the shoulder. "I like your dowsing story. You just happened to be watching old Hank Dowser. Oh, that's a good one. I'll tell that tale to everybody, see if I don't."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Here. Drink. You deserve first swallow from the first bucket of clear water from this well."

Alvin knew that the custom was for the owner to get first drinks. But she was offering, and he was so dry he couldn't have spit two bits' worth even if you paid him five bucks an ounce. So he set the bucket to his lips and drank, letting it splash out onto his shirt.

"I'd wager you're hungry, too," she said.

"More tired than hungry, I think," said Alvin.

"Then come inside to sleep."

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He knew he should, but he could see the Unmaker not far off, and he was afeared to sleep again, that was the truth. "Thank you kindly, Ma'am, but anyhow, I'd like to be off by myself a few minutes."

"Suit yourself," she said, and went on inside.

The morning breeze chilled him as it dried off the water he spilled on his shirt. Was his ravishment by the Unmaker only a dream? He didn't think so. He was awake right enough, and it was real, and if Gertie Smith hadn't come along and dunked that bucket in the well, he would've been unmade. The Unmaker wasn't hiding out no more. He wasn't sneaking in backways nor roundabout. No matter where he looked, there it was, shimmering in the greyish morning light.

For some reason the Unmaker picked this morning for a face-to-face. Only Alvin didn't know how he was supposed to fight. If digging a well and building it up so fine wasn't making enough to drive off his enemy, he didn't know what else to do. The Unmaker wasn't like the men he wrestled with in town. The Unmaker had nothing he could take ahold of.

One thing was sure. Alvin'd never have a night of sleep again if he didn't take this Unmaker down somehow and wrestle him into the dirt.

I'm supposed to be your master, Alvin said to the Unmaker. So tell me, Unmaker, how do I undo *you*, when all you are is Undoing? Who's going to teach me how to win this battle, when you can sneak up on me in my sleep, and I don't have the faintest idea how to get to you?

As he spoke these words inside his head, Alvin walked to the edge of the woods. The Unmaker backed away from him, always out of reach. Al knew without looking that it also closed up behind him, so it had him on all sides.

This is the middle of the uncut wood where I ought to feel most at home, but the greensong, it's gone silent here, and all around me is my enemy from birth, and me here with no plan at all.

The Unmaker, though, he had a plan. He didn't need to waste no time a-dithering about what to do, Alvin found that out real quick.

Cause while Alvin was a-standing there in the cool heavy breeze of a summer morning, the air suddenly went chill, and blamed if snowflakes didn't start to fall. Right down on the green-leaf trees they came, settling on the tall thick grass between them. Thick and cold it piled up, not the wet heavy flakes of a warm snow, but the tiny icy crystals of a deep winter blizzard blow. Alvin shivered.

"You can't do this," he said.

But his eyes weren't closed *now*, he knew that. This wasn't no half-asleep dream. This was real snow, and it was so thick and cold that the branches of summer-green trees were snapping, the leaves were tearing off and falling to the ground in a tinkle of broken ice. And Alvin himself

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was like to freeze himself clear to death if he didn't get out of there somehow.

He started to walk back the way he came, but the snow was coming down so thick he couldn't see more than five or six feet ahead of him, and he couldn't feel his way because the Unmaker had deadened the greensong of the living woods. Pretty soon he wasn't walking, he was running. Only he didn't run surefooted like Ta-Kumsaw taught him; he ran as noisy and stupid as any oaf of a White man, and like most Whites would've, he slipped on a patch of ice-covered stone and sprawled out face down across a reach of snow.

Snow that caught up in his mouth and nose and into his ears, snow the clung between his fingers, just like the slime last night, just like the Unmaker in his dream, and he choked and sputtered and cried out—

"I know it's a lie!"

His voice was swallowed up in the wall of snow.

"It's summer!" he shouted.

His jaw ached from the cold and he knew it'd hurt too much to speak again, but still he screamed through numb lips, "I'll make you stop!"

And then he realized that he could never make anything out of the Unmaker, could never make the Unmaker do or be anything because it was only Undoing and Unbeing. It wasn't the Unmaker he needed to call to, it was all the living things around him, the trees, the grass, the earth, the air itself. It was the greensong that he needed to restore.

He grabbed ahold of that idea and used it, spoke again, his voice scarce more than a whisper now, but he called to them, and not in anger.

"Summer!" he whispered.

"Warm air!" he said.

"Leaves green!" he shouted. "Hot wind out of the southwest. Thunderheads in the afternoon, mist in the morning, sunlight hotting it up, burning off the fog!"

Did it change, just a little? Did the snowfall slacken? Did the drifts on the ground melt lower, the heaps on the treelimbs tumble off, baring more of the branch?

"It's a hot morning, dry!" he cried. "Rain may drift in later like the gift of the Wise Men, coming from a long way off, but for now sunlight beating on the leaves, waking you up, you're *growing,* putting out leaves, that's right! That's right!"

There was gladness in his voice because the snowfall was just a spatter of rain now, the snow on the ground was melted back to patches here and there, the broke-off leaves were sprouting on the branch again as quick as militia in a doubletime march.

And in the silence after his last shout, he heard birdsong.

Song like he'd never heard before. He didn't know this bird, this sweet

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melody that changed with every whistle and never played the same tune again. It was a weaving song, but one whose pattern you couldn't find, so you couldn't ever sing it again, but you also couldn't ravel it, spin it out and break it down. It was all of one piece, all of one single Making, and Alvin knew that if he could just find the bird with that song in his throat he'd be safe. His victory would be complete.

He ran, and now the greensong of the forest was with him, and his feet found the right places to step without him looking. He followed that song until he came to the clearing where the singing was.

Perched on an old log with a patch of snow still in the northwest shadow—a redbird. And sitting in front of that log, almost nose to nose as he listened to it sing—Arthur Stuart.

Alvin walked around the two of them real slow, walking a clean circle before he come much closer. Arthur Stuart like to never noticed he was there, he never took his eyes off that bird. The sunlight dazzled on the two of them, but neither bird nor boy so much as blinked. Alvin didn't say nothing, either. Just like Arthur Stuart he was all caught up in the redbird song.

It wasn't no different from all the other redbirds, the thousand scarlet songbirds Alvin had seen since he was little. Except that from its throat came music that no other bird had ever sung before. This wasn't *a* redbird. Nor was it *the* redbird, for there was no single bird that had some gift the other redbirds lacked. It was just Redbird, the one picked for this moment to speak in the voice of all the birds, to sing the song of all the singers, so that this boy could hear.

Alvin knelt down on the new-grown grass not three feet from Redbird, and listened to its song. He knew from what Lolla-Wossiky once told him that Redbird's song was all the stories of the Red man, everything they ever done that was worth doing. Alvin halfway hoped to understand that ancient tale, or at least to hear how the Redbird told of things that he took part in. The Prophet Lolla-Wossiky walking on water; Tippy-Canoe River all scarlet with Red folks' blood; Ta-Kumsaw standing with a dozen musketballs in him, still crying out for his men to stand, to fight, to drive the White thieves back.

But the sense of the song eluded him no matter how he listened. He might run the forest with a Red man's legs and hear the greensong with a Red man's ears, but Redbird's song wasn't meant for him. The saying told the truth: No one girl gets all the suitors, and no boy gets all the knacks. There was much that Alvin could do already, and much ahead of him to learn, but there'd be far more that was always out of his ken, and Redbird's song was part of that.

Yet Alvin was sure as shucks that Redbird wasn't here by accident. Come like this at the end of his first face-to-face with the Unmaker,

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Redbird had to have some purpose. He had to get some answers out of Redbird's song.

Alvin was just about to speak, just about to ask the question burning in him ever since he first learned what his destiny might be. But it wasn't his voice that broke into Redbird's song. It was Arthur Stuart's.

"I don't know days coming up," said the mixup boy. His voice was like music and the words were clearer than any Alvin ever heard that three-year-old say before. "I only know days gone."

It took a second for Alvin to hitch himself to what was going on here. What Arthur said was the answer to Alvin's question. Will I ever be a Maker like the torch girl said? That was what Alvin would've asked, and Arthur's words were the answer.

But not Arthur Stuart's own answer, that was plain. The little boy no more understood what he was saying than he did when he was mimicking Nat's and Gertie's quarrel last night. He was giving Redbird's answer. Interpreting from birdsong into speech that Alvin's ears were fit to understand.

Alvin knew now that he'd asked the wrong question. He didn't need Redbird to tell him he was supposed to be a Maker—he knowed that firm and sure years ago, and knew it still in spite of all doubts. The real question wasn't whether, it was *how* to be a Maker.

Tell me how.

Redbird changed his song to a soft and simple tune, more like normal birdsong, quite different from the thousand-year-old Red Man's tale that he'd been singing up to now. Alvin didn't understand the sense of it, but he knew all the same what it was about. It was the song of Making. Over and over, the same tune kept repeating, only a few moments of it—but they were blinding in their brightness, a song so true that Alvin saw it with his eyes, felt it from his lips to his groin, tasted it and smelled it. The song of Making, and it was his own song, he knew it from how sweet it tasted on his tongue.

And when the song was at its peak, Arthur Stuart spoke again in a voice that was hardly human it piped so sharp, it sang so clear.

"The Maker is the one who is part of what he makes," said the mixup boy.

Alvin wrote the words in his heart, even though he didn't understand them. Because he knew that someday he *would* understand them, and when he did, he would have the power of the ancient Makers who built the Crystal City. He would understand, and use his power, and find the Crystal City and build it once again.

The Maker is the one who is part of what he makes.

Redbird fell silent. Stood still, head cocked; and then became, not Redbird, but any old bird with scarlet feathers. Off it flew.

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Arthur Stuart watched the bird out of sight. Then he called out after it in his own true childish voice, "Bird! Fly bird!"

Alvin knelt beside the boy, weak from the night's work, the grey dawn's fear, this bright day's birdsong.

"I flied," said Arthur Stuart. For the first time, it seemed, he took notice Alvin was there, and turned to him.

"Did you now?" whispered Alvin, reluctant to destroy the child's dream by telling him that folks don't fly.

"Big blackbird tote me," said Arthur. "Fly and fly." Then Arthur reached up his hands and pressed in on Alvin's cheeks. "Maker," he said. Then he laughed and laughed with joy.

So Arthur wasn't just a mimic. He really understood Redbird's song, some of it at least. Enough to know the name of Alvin's destiny.

"Don't you tell nobody," Alvin said. "I won't tell nobody you can talk to birds, and you don't tell nobody I'm a Maker. Promise?"

Arthur's face grew serious. "Don't talk birds," he said. "Birds talk *me*." And then: "I *flied*."

"I believe you," Alvin said.

"I beeve *you*," said Arthur. Then he laughed again.

Alvin stood up and so did Arthur. Al took him by the hand. "Let's go on home," he said.

He took Arthur to the roadhouse, where Old Peg Guester was full of scold at the mixup boy for running off and bothering folks all morning. But it was a loving scold, and Arthur grinned like an idiot at the voice of the woman he called Mama. As the door closed with Arthur Stuart on the other side, Alvin told himself, I'm going to tell that boy what he done for me. Someday I'll tell him what this meant.

Alvin came home by way of the springhouse path, and headed on down toward the smithy, where Nat was no doubt angry at him for not being ready for work, even though he dug a well all night.

The well. Alvin found himself standing by the hole that he had dug as a monument to Hank Dowser, with the white stone bright in the sunlight, bright and cruel as scornful laughter.

And in that moment Alvin knew why the Unmaker came to him that night. Not because of the true well that he dug. Not because he had used his knack to hold the water back, not because he had softened the stone and bent it to his need. It was because he had dug that first hole down to the stone for one reason only—to make Hank Dowser look the fool.

To punish him? Yes sir, to make him a laughingstock to any man who saw the stone-bottomed well on the spot that Hank had marked. It would destroy him, take away his name as a dowser—and unfairly so, because he *was* a good dowser who got hisself fooled by the lay of the land. Hank

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made an honest mistake, and Al had got all set to punish him as if he was a fool, which surely he was not.

Tired as he was, weak from labor and the battle with Unmaker, Alvin didn't waste a minute. He fetched the spade from where it lay by the working well, then stripped off his shirt and set to work. When he dug this false well, it was a work of evil, to unmake an honest man for no reason better than spite. Filling it in, though, was a Maker's work. Since it was daylight, Alvin couldn't even use his knack to help—he did full labor on it till he thought he was so tired he might just die.

It was noon, and him without supper or breakfast either one, but the well was filled right up, the turves set back on so they'd grow back, and if you didn't look close you'd never know there'd been a hole at all. Alvin *did* use his knack a little, since no one was about, to weave the grassroots back together, knit them into the ground, so there'd be no dead patches to mark the spot.

All the time, though, what burned worse than the sun on his back or the hunger in his belly was his own shame. He was so busy last night being angry and thinking how to make a foool of Hank Dowser that it never once occurred to him to do the right thing and use his knack to break right through the shelf of stone in the very spot Hank picked. No one ever would've known save Alvin hisself that there'd been aught wrong with the place. That would've been the Christian thing, the charitable thing to do. When a man slaps your face, you answer by shaking his hand, that's what Jesus said to do, and Alvin just plain wasn't listening, Alvin was too cussed proud.

That's what called the Unmaker to me, thought Alvin. I could've used my knack to build up, and I used it to tear down. Well, never again, never again, never again. He made that promise three times, and even though it was a silent promise and no one'd ever know, he'd keep it better than any oath he might take before a judge or even a minister.

Well, too late now. If he'd thought of this before Gertie ever saw the false well or drew water from the true, he might've filled up the other well and made this one good after all. But now she'd seen the stone, and if he dug through it then all his secrets would be out. And once you've drunk water from a good new well, you can't never fill it up till it runs dry on its own. To fill up a living well is to beg for drouth and cholera to dog you all the days of your life.

He'd undone all he could. You can be sorry, and you can be forgiven, but you can't call back the futures that your bad decisions lost. He didn't need no philosopher to tell him that.

Nat wasn't a-hammering in the forge, and there wasn't no smoke from the smithy chimney, either. Must be Nat was up at the house, doing

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some chores there, Alvin figured. So he put the spade away back in the smithy and then headed on toward the house.

Halfway there, he came to the good well, and there was Nat Smith sitting on the low wall of footing stones Al had laid down to be foundation for the wellhouse.

"Morning, Alvin," said the master.

"Morning, sir," said Alvin.

"Dropped me the tin and copper bucket right down to the bottom here. You must've dug like the devil hisself, boy, to get it so deep."

"Didn't want it to run dry."

"And lined it with stone already," said the smith. "It's a wonderment, I say."

"I worked hard and fast."

"You also dug in the right place, I see."

Alvin took a deep breath. "The way I figure, sir, I dug right where the dowser said to dig."

"I saw another hole just yonder," said Nat Smith. "Stone as thick and hard as the devil's hoof all along the bottom. You telling me you don't aim for folks to guess why you dug there?"

"I filled that old hole up," said Alvin. "I wish I'd never dug such a well. I don't want nobody telling stories on Hank Dowser. There was water there, right enough, and no dowser in the world could've guessed about the stone."

"Except you," said Nat.

"I ain't no dowser, sir," said Alvin. And he told the lie again: "I just saw that his wand dipped over here, too."

Nat Smith shook his head, a grin just creeping out across his face. "My wife told me that tale already, and I like to died a-laughing at it. I cuffed your head for saying he was wrong. You telling me now you want him to get the credit?"

"He's a true dowser," said Alvin. "And I *ain't* no dowser, sir, so I reckon since he *is* one, he ought to get the name for it."

Nat Smith drew up the copper bucket, put it to his lips, and drank a few swallows. Then he tipped his head and poured the rest of the water straight onto his face and laughed out loud. "That's the sweetest water I ever drunk in my life, I swear."

It wasn't the same as promising to go along with his story and let Hank Dowser think it was his well, but Al knew it was the best he'd get from his master. "If it's all right, sir," said Al, "I'm a mite hungry."

"Yes, go eat, you've earned it."

Alvin walked by him. The smell of new water rose up from the well as he passed.

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Nat Smith spoke again behind him. "Gertie tells me you took first swallow from the well."

Al turned around, fearing trouble now. "I did, sir, but not till she give it to me."

Nat studied on that notion awhile, as if he was deciding whether to make it reason for punishing Al or not. "Well," he finally said, "well, that's just like her, but I don't mind. There's still enough of that first dip in the wooden bucket for me to save a few swallows for Hank Dowser. I promised him a drink from the first bucket, and I'll keep my word when he comes back around."

"When he comes, sir," said Alvin, "and I hope you won't mind, but I think I'd like it best and so would he if I just didn't happen to be at home, if you see what I mean. I don't think he cottoned to me much."

The smith eyed him narrowly. "If this is just a way for you to get a few hours off work when that dowser comes back, why"—he broke into a grin—"why, I reckon that you've earned it with last night's labor."

"Thank you sir," said Alvin.

"You heading back to the house?"

"Yes sir."

"Well, I'll take those tools and put them away—you carry this bucket to the missus. She's expecting it. A lot less way to tote the water than the stream. I got to thank Hank Dowser special for choosing this very exact spot." The smith was still chuckling to himself at his wit when Alvin reached the house.

Gertie Smith took the bucket, set Alvin down, and near filled him to the brim with hot fried bacon and good greasy biscuits. It was so much food that Al had to beg her to stop. "We've already finished one pig," said Alvin. "No need to kill another just for my breakfast."

"Pigs are just corn on the hoof," said Gertie Smith, "and you worked two hogs' worth last night, I'll say that."

Belly full and belching, Alvin climbed the ladder into the loft over the kitchen, stripped off his clothes, and burrowed into the blankets on his bed.

The Maker is the one who is part of what he makes.

Over and over he whispered the words to himself as he went to sleep. He had no dreams or troubles, and slept clear through till suppertime, and then again all night till dawn.

It was a week before Hank Dowser found his way back to Hatrack River. A miserable week with no profit in it, because try as he would he couldn't find decent dry ground for them folks west of town to dig their cellar. "It's all wet ground," he said. "I can't help it if it's all watery."

But they held him responsible just the same. Folks are like that. They

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act like they thought the dowser *put* the water where it sets, instead of just pointing to it. Same way with torches—blamed them half the time for *causing* what they saw, when all they did was see it. There was no gratitude or even simple understanding in most folks.

So it was a relief to be back with somebody half decent like Nat Smith. Even if Hank wasn't too proud of the way Nat was dealing with his prentice boy. How could Hank criticize him? He himself hadn't done much better—oh, he was pure embarrassed now to think how he railed on that boy and got him a cuffing, and for nothing, really, just a little affront to Hank Dowser's pride. Jesus stood and took whippings and a crown of thorns in silence, but I lash out when a prentice mumbles a few silly words. Oh, thoughts like that put Hank Dowser in a dark mood, and he was aching for a chance to apologize to the boy.

But the boy wasn't there, which was too bad, though Hank didn't have long to brood about it. Gertie Smith took Hank Dowser up to the house and near jammed the food down his throat with a ramrod, just to get in an extra half-loaf of bread, it felt like. "I can't hardly walk," said Hank, which was true; but it was also true that Gertie Smith cooked just as good as her husband forged and that prentice boy shod and Hank dowsed, which is to say, with a true knack. Everybody has his talent, everybody has his gift from God, and we go about sharing gifts with each other, that's the way of the world, the best way.

So it was with pleasure and pride that Hank drank the swallows of water from the first clear bucket drawn from the well. Oh, it was fine water, sweet water, and he loved the way they thanked him from their hearts. It wasn't till he was out getting mounted on his Picklewing again that he realized he hadn't seen the well. Surely he should've seen the well—

He rounded the smithy on horseback and looked where he thought he had dowsed the spot, but the ground didn't appear like it had been troubled in a hundred years. Not even the trench the prentice dug while he was standing there. It took him a minute to find where the well actually was, sort of halfway between smithy and house, a fine little roof over the windlass, the whole thing finished with smooth-worked stone. But surely he hadn't been so near the house when the wand dipped—

"Oh, Hank!" called Nat Smith. "Hank, I'm glad you ain't gone yet!"

Where was the man? Oh, there, back in the meadow just up from the smithy, near where Hank had first looked for the well. Waving a stick in his hand—a forked stick—

"Your wand, the one you used to dowse this well—you want it back?"

"No, Nat, no thanks. I never use the same wand twice. Doesn't work proper when it isn't fresh."

Nat Smith pitched the wand back over his head, walked back down

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the slope and stood exactly in the place where Hank *thought* he had dowsed the well to be. "What do you think of the well house we built?"

Hank glanced back toward the well. "Fine stonework. If you ever give up the forge, I bet there's a living for you in stonecutting."

"Why thank you, Hank! But it was my prentice boy did it all."

"That's some boy you got," said Hank. But it left a bad taste in his mouth, to say those words. There was something made him uneasy about this whole conversation. Nat Smith meant something sly, and Hank didn't know rightly what it was. Never mind. Time to be on his way. "Good-bye, Nat!" he said, walking his nag back toward the road. "I'll be back for shoes, remember!"

Nat laughed and waved. "I'll be glad to see your ugly old face when you come!"

With that, Hank nudged old Picklewing and headed off right brisk for the road that led to the covered bridge over the river. That was one of the nicest things about the westbound road out of Hatrack. From there to the Wobbish the track was as sweet as you please, with covered bridges over every river, every stream, every rush and every rivulet. Folks were known to camp at night on the bridges, they were so tight and dry.

There must've been three dozen redbird nests in the eaves of the Hatrack Bridge. The birds were making such a racket that Hank allowed as how it was a miracle they didn't wake the dead. Too bad redbirds were too scrawny for eating. There'd be a banquet on that bridge, if it was worth the trouble.

"Ho there, Picklewing, my girl, ho," he said. He sat astride his horse, a-standing in the middle of the bridge, listening to the redbird song. Remembering now as clear as could be how the wand had leapt clean out of his hands and flung itself up into the meadow grass. Flung itself northeast of the spot he dowsed. And that's just where Nat Smith picked it up when he was saying good-bye.

Their fine new well wasn't on the spot he dowsed at all. The whole time he was there, they all were lying to him, pretending he dowsed them a well, but the water they drank was from another place.

Hank knew, oh yes, he knew who chose the spot they used. Hadn't the wand as much as told him when it flew off like that? Flew off because the boy spoke up, that smart-mouth prentice. And now they made mock of him behind his back, not saying a thing to his face, of course, but he knew that Nat was laughing the whole time, figuring he wasn't even smart enough to notice the switch.

Well, I noticed, yes sir. You made a fool of me, Nat Smith, you and that prentice boy of yours. But I noticed. A man can forgive seven times, or even seven times seven. But then there comes the fiftieth time, and even a good Christian can't forget.

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"Gee-ap," he said angrily. Picklewing's ears twitched and she started forward in a gentle walk, new shoes clopping loud on the floorboards of the bridge, echoing from the walls and ceiling. "Alvin," whispered Hank Dowser. "Prentice Alvin. Got no respect for any man's knack except his own." ●

—Sycamore Hill, August 1986

LEPIDOPTERAN

At night I hang upside down
in the closet,
swaddled in raw silk.
The blood pours into my head
and I see things
from a new perspective.
I'd rather be in bed
but you say I don't fit;
these things take time.
I remember your pheromones
as new flesh unfolds.
Filigree veins
branch and rebranch;
skin stretches tight.
When the alarm goes off
the metamorphosis stops
and I brush my teeth.
No one knows yet
I'm growing wings
for you.

—James Patrick Kelly

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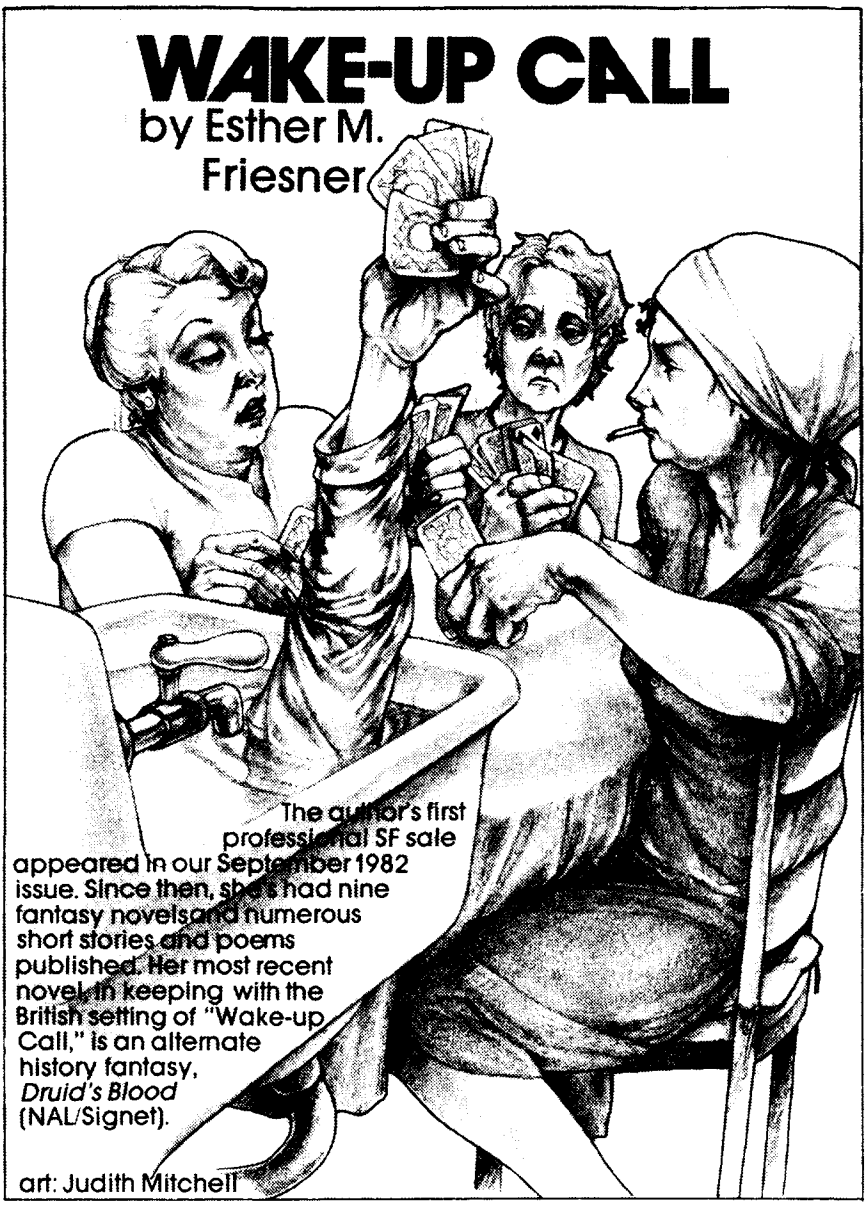
WAKE-UP CALL

by Esther M. Friesner



The author's first professional SF sale appeared in our September 1982 issue. Since then, she's had nine fantasy novels and numerous short stories and poems published. Her most recent novel, in keeping with the British setting of "Wake-up Call," is an alternate history fantasy, *Druid's Blood* (NAL/Signet).

art: Judith Mitchell

"I *know* I heard something this time." Vivian set down her cards and cocked her head towards the closed bedroom door just off the kitchen. She turned to the woman on her left. "Hadn't you best take a peep in there, Fay?"

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"Whuffo?" Fay's reply was somewhat garbled by the cigarette dangling from her thickly lipsticked mouth. Vivian could not remember the last time she'd seen Fay without a smoking fag wiggling and bobbing when she spoke.

Across from Vivian, Gwen snickered nastily into her hand. "Always hearing things from in there, *you* are." She tucked a wisp of bleached blonde hair back behind her ear and fanned her cards. "*Last* time it was a loose shutter. Time before, it was just the local brats wheeling their Guy about the parish in a rattly old pram, collecting for the bonfire. Time before that, a mouse'd got in."

"Bloody shame, that." Fay plucked a card from one position in her hand and slid it into another. "Council did halfway decent by us, they'd keep the vermin out." An inch of ash dropped from her cigarette. Gwen edged away from it fastidiously.

"You might use a saucer if an ashtray's too much to ask." She brushed handfuls of invisible ashes from her beige linen sheath skirt and winced as the waistband cut into her growing midriff.

"Get stuffed," Fay replied pleasantly.

"But I *did* hear something," Vivian insisted. "I *did*."

"One club," said Fay.

"Two hearts," Gwen countered.

The basin of water opposite Fay bubbled and seethed. An arm, clothed all in white samite, rose out of the enamelled depths and brandished a hand of cards. It laid these face down on the oilcloth-covered kitchen table, plunged back into the water, and came up again with gemmed rings sparkling brightly on thumb and forefinger.

"Lady bids two diamonds," Fay muttered. The slim white hand at the end of that samite-clothed arm gave her the old thumbs-up. "Stupid cow," Fay added.

This time the Lady's hand used a different finger-sign to communicate her displeasure with her over-critical bridge partner.

"Pass," Vivian said without thinking. She completely missed the venomous glance Gwen shot her. Her watery brown eyes, pink-rimmed and weak, kept darting towards the closed bedroom door. "Look, I really *have* to check. I simply can *not* play an intelligent rubber with these doubts preying on my mind."

"Or any other time," Gwen hissed for Fay's benefit. Fay snorted prodigiously and stroked her sagging jowls, her attention still focused on her hand. She paid no heed when Vivian scraped her chair backwards and padded away from the table in her ratty Marks and Spencer scuffs.

She paid heed aplenty, though, when Vivian opened the bedroom door and screamed.

"He's gone! He's *gone!*" Vivian reeled against the doorjamb, clutching

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her seersucker wrap-dress tightly around her scrawny body. "I *knew* it!" she squealed at them all. "I *told* you the time was ripe for this happening, the country in the state it's in and all—crime, devaluation, the Irish, all those peculiar foreigners just *streaming* in, worse than the Saxons ever were. Would you listen? Would *any* of you listen? 'Oh, it's just little Viv again,' you all said. 'Little Viv will have her fancies.' Well, where's the fancy in an empty bed's what *I'd* like to know!" She straightened her shoulders and struck a self-righteous pose, one hand on the doorjamb, one still securing the neck of her wrapper.

Fay stood up and slowly laid her cards on the table, face down. " 'F this is another one of your hysteric attacks, Vivian, I'll take you and stick you headfirst into the crotch of one of your own damned oak trees."

"Crotch?" Gwen burst into a fit of dirty-schoolgirl giggles. She scraped one expensively manicured forefinger over the other. "Naughty, naughty. Such language for a royal lady!"

"Oh, stop your gob, you great simpering slug!" Fay was so provoked, she actually let the cigarette drop from her lips. It rolled across the oilcloth and smoldered among the fallen cards until the Lady of the Basin thoughtfully extinguished it with a splash.

Gwen pursed her lips, painstakingly outlined and lovingly tinted a most fashionable and unsuitable shade of maroon. Her over-plucked eyebrows rose. "You're just jealous," she said, "because *I'm* the only one around here who hasn't let herself go to seed while we've been waiting."

"No, just let yourself go down on your back for anything young as crawls out of a pub too tiddled to tell your proper age in a dim light!"

"Doesn't *any*one want to look after where he's got to?" Vivian gazed from one enraged queen to the other, her weak eyes blinking madly.

"Bloody hell, why bother?" Fay picked up her chair and slammed it down on the linoleum for emphasis. "If it's Time, we'll hear of it soon enough. And if it's just another false alarm . . ."

"Last time he was sleepwalking," Gwen said, enjoying the distress her words caused little Viv. "*You* remember, don't you, love? It was during the Battle of Britain. You kept on about how this was It, he couldn't possibly stay asleep through a crisis *this* big, the country needed him, the New Age was coming and you were going to celebrate by going out and getting a marcel wave once the shouting died." Her ungenerous mouth quirked up coldly at the corners. "*I* was the one found him down in the Underground—still asleep, mind—and brought him into the light of day again. Just as well. You'd've looked beastly with a marcel." She patted her chignon. "I'll be the one to know when he really *does* wake. A wife always knows."

"A wife always knows sweet bugger-all," Fay snarled. She shouldered her way past Vivian into the bedroom. The iron-headed single bed was

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empty, the jewel-encrusted coverlet in disarray on the floor. Briskly, Fay shook it out, her big, capable hands smoothing it back so that the black silk veiled the tell-tale bottom of the funeral barge stowed in segments beneath the bedstead. Then she went back to the kitchen table and lit herself another cigarette.

"That's *it?*" Vivian's gingery eyelashes looked pathetic when she fluttered them in disbelief like that. She had an unfortunate habit of plucking them out when beset by rude tradespeople in the market. "Fay, that's all you're going to *do?*"

"Don't skirl your voice like that, Viv. It gives me the pip. Sweet loving Christ, what do you *expect* of me?"

Vivian waved her hands about helplessly. "I don't know. Something . . . magical?"

"Jesus God, woman, if it's magic you want, you're able to work some yourself. You're a fucking *nymph,* after all." Fay glowered at Vivian, chin in hand, as the little woman showed no greater reaction than a blush at such foul language.

"Now, Fay . . ." Gwen's voice was all treacly. "You know Viv hasn't been able to use her magic ever since . . . you know." Her goody-goody face, full of compassion and forbearance, just begged for a bashing. Fay's fingers itched to do it.

"Shouldn't've locked the old sod *up* in that damned tree, then, if she was going to go soft about it after!"

"I've tried." Viv wove the neck-ties of her wrap around and over and through her knobbly fingers. She was going to turn teary any moment. "You know I have, Fay. The therapists I've been to, the doctors, the discussion groups, the self-help books from the States—!"

"And hardly any of it on the National Health. Can't see why you don't let him *out* again, then."

"But I *can't* do that! Honestly, not. I have made the effort, you know, but it's no good. It's as if all my powers were tied up in that tree with the dear old fella. You can't imagine the guilt."

"Ballocks," said Fay. "Ballocks to you and your guilt, too." She got up again and fetched a plate of cream buns from the pantry. "I'm going to watch telly. Stuff your bloody guilt, Viv, and make me a mug of tea. Maybe I'll try scaring up a vision of our Arthur after Benny Hill's done. 'Til then, bugger off, the lot of you." She chomped down hard on a round, sticky pastry.

"That is *hardly* the way to address us." Gwen had caught the infirmity of self-righteousness from a presently sniveling Vivian. While the smaller woman went whimpering away to put the kettle on, the erstwhile Lady of Camelot held forth. "We are all queens in our own right. You were never this common in Cornwall. I shudder to think what the gentle-

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men of the press will make of you: The style of an underpaid char and the vocabulary of a Billingsgate porter. Ugh."

"You *do* outrank Gwen and me, Fay," Vivian mentioned timorously from stoveside. "I was never really a queen, unless you count poor, dear Merlin's flatteries, and Gwen was only Queen of Camelot by marriage, but you—"

"Bugger you *and* Gwen *and* Camelot *and* Merlin *and* the gentlemen of the press while you're at it! Queenship, bah! I bloody well wish I'd never *heard* of the fucking realm of Air and Darkness!" Morgan le Fay went quite scarlet with her diatribe and began to choke on a bite of cream bun. It devolved upon Gwen to hustle her into a chair, the Lady to reach up out of the basin and pound her on the back, and little Vivian to bustle over with a frosty glass of lemon squash.

They were so caught up in ministering to their own that they never heard the back door open, or the approaching jingle and creak of a chain-mail shirt over boiled leather armor. In fact, they didn't even notice that Arthur had returned, until he plopped down heavily in one of the empty chairs.

Fay recovered quickly. "Where the hell have *you* been?"

Cool, imperturbable eyes the color of newly forged steel met her own. Arthur drew a breath, twiddled his fingers in the empty scabbard at his side, and thought better of saying anything. He seized a bun instead, and devoured it.

Gwen made a strong comeback from the shock of seeing him so suddenly with them. *"Darling!"* she trilled, opening her arms wide to receive her long-slumbering lord.

The basin waters churned themselves into a maelstrom in little as the Lady enthusiastically lifted Excalibur clear of the foam. Arthur made no move to embrace either his wife or his sword. He did not move at all, except for masticating the cream bun slowly and thoughtfully. The Lady held her pose for some time, then tilted the blade towards its whilom master in an inquiring, then an encouraging, then an insistent manner, brandishing it urgently. It was for naught.

"No go, eh, Artie?" Fay chuckled knowingly. She rose, and a glamour fell over her. Her eternal cigarette was gone, as was the dowdy housedress Gwen so deplored. Her still alluring figure was sheathed in crimson silk starred with pearls, and when she reached up to undo the dusting kerchief binding her hair, a cascade of raven curls tumbled to her feet. Her face no longer sagged, but shone with the soft radiance of a star.

"No." His voice was harsh with long disuse.

"What's the cock-up this time?"

"*I* wake; the dream still slumbers." The King of the Britons wiped his

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crumb-decked beard with the back of his hand. "My people are deaf to the great call. They will not follow me. They hardly *know* me."

Morgan le Fay clucked her tongue. "Comes of not enough central heating and too many boiled sweets, I'll be bound. Never you mind, Artie. They'll be ready for you some day."

Arthur's eyes blazed. "And when will that day come? Soon or late? Too late or never?"

"Now, pet, there'll still be an England for you to rule when you *do* return. Trust old Morgan." Fay put her arm around his shoulders. She had to go on tip-toe to do it, at which discovery she looked a bit surprised.

"He's grown," Viv said in that mouse-hush voice of hers.

"Legends will," Fay remarked over one shoulder as she steered Arthur back into the bedroom. She shut the door behind them.

Viv had a fresh kettle on the boil when Fay emerged, alone. Her gown was rumpled and her hair in tousles. Gwen's eyes narrowed.

"Just *what* were you doing with my Arthur?"

"A lot better than you, likely. How in bloody hell did you *expect* me to get that poor bastard back off to sleep? Warm milk? Nembutal? Another fucking mortal wound? Christ, I want a fag." Morgan le Fay swept her hands over her bosom and was rewarded with the full resurgence of her frowsy *tenue,* dusting kerchief included. She extracted a pack of Players from the pocket of her housedress and lit up gratefully.

She flopped into a kitchen chair as Viv set a fresh mug of tea at her place. She slurped it with gusto while her companions observed her somberly.

"Didn't they *know* who he was?" Vivian was the first to dare break the spell. "They saw him and they didn't *know?*" Her weak eyes swam with sudden tears.

Fay shrugged. A damp, tragic silence fell over the kitchen. The others sat down at table again. Gwen sighed deeply and repeatedly. Vivian absently plucked out one eyelash after another. Excalibur fell from the Lady's hand and made a rubbery ringing sound when it hit the lino. Fay looked up from her tea to note that the Lady's fingernails were all nibbled down to the quick and the cuticles were in woeful need of trimming.

"Never you mind, girls," Fay said, attempting to lift their collective spirits. "Time'll come some day, and we'll be there to meet it. Chin up." She glanced at the Lady. "Or whatever."

Fay snapped her fingers and a ball of blue fire appeared in front of Vivian, delivered itself of a fresh pack of cards, and vanished. Viv gave a faint smile and broke the seal.

A bedspring groaned. Vivian froze.

"I *heard* something."

"Oh, shut up, Viv—and deal the cards." ●

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THE HOUSE ON CEMETERY STREET

by Cherry Wilder

Cherry Wilder's last story for IAsfm, "Dreamwood," appeared in our December 1986 issue. She returns to our pages with an unsettling Christmas tale set in a sleepy German town. Ms. Wilder began publishing science fiction and fantasy in Australia in 1974 and went to live in West Germany in 1976. Her latest novel, Cruel Designs, was published by Piatkus Books in the United Kingdom and she is currently at work on a scientific romance set in 1889 in Berlin and the wilder areas of the Harz mountains.

art: Linda Burr

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The two youngest children of the German author, August Fuller, spent eight years in California. After the war, their mother Vicki, his second wife, flew back as soon as ever she could to her husband's side. But there was no point in bringing the children back to Germany just yet . . . the country was flattened and there was nothing to eat. So they stayed on until the end of 1947 with the family of Vicki's school friend, Estelle Bart O'Brien, and went back when Lucy had done her freshman year in college and Jo had completed the eighth grade.

They had left as Luisa and Joachim; they flew back in as Lucy and Jo. They were a couple of good-looking kids, but a little hard to place, bound to be exotics wherever they went. Jo at thirteen was short and slight with a smooth pre-adolescent beauty, large dark eyes, a mop of curly hair. Lucy at nearly eighteen was tall and slender, not built for sweaters. Her face was delicate, rather bony, her brown hair naturally-waved; her eyes were grey. She had had just enough dates to get along, but she knew that in certain circles she was classed as a dog.

It had taken an enormous amount of wire-pulling for them to fly at all. They were used to this hint of privilege and special treatment, and knew that it had to do with their father who worked miracles. Why, he had kept up a marvelous flow of letters throughout the war, postmarked Portugal at first, then U.S. Field Post. The children had received jointly over fifty letters—written in German, of course, but in the more readable English script. Vicki had set the letters carefully aside for future publication. Now it was getting on towards Christmas and they were sitting on the plane with a bunch of Air Force wives. They tried to brief each other on their lost childhood in the old country.

"Do you remember Christmas?" asked Lucy. "Do you remember the house at Christmas?"

It was something she herself could never forget. The northern Christmas, the cold, the delicious warmth, the suspense, the candlelight, had all sunk into her soul.

"The whole house smelled of cookies," said Jo. "There were green branches on the stairs. We were allowed to cut out Christmas cookies down in the kitchen. Aunt Helga sat at the corner of a huge table covered with oilcloth and ground Papa's coffee by hand."

"Did she?" said Lucy, surprised. "I remember the hall was too narrow, especially in winter with the coats and boots. There was a hallstand that Papa called 'the Bulgarian atrocity.' I thought it was rather pretty because of the lady painted on the mirror. Name six rooms that you truly remember and put someone you truly remember in each one."

"Papa in the study," said Jo, "that's easy. He let me sharpen pencils and spin the globe. Was the study upstairs?"

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"It was on the landing, the mezzanine; it had a wreath on the door at Christmas."

"Okay. I remember Mom ringing the little silver bell in the room downstairs with blue curtains where they always had the tree. I remember Aunt Helga in the dining room carving the goose. Now we go upstairs. It's getting kind of foggy. Hey . . . Harald in a bedroom on the dark side of the house. I stood at the window looking out at a bunch of people in black, carrying flowers. He said 'It's a funeral, someone is being buried.' I really didn't know."

"I slept alone," said Lucy, "because poor Roswitha had gone away to University. I had the bedroom all to myself. It was across the corridor from the bedroom you shared with Harald."

Roswitha, their half-sister, had married the "decadent" painter Hans Molbe and had died in Paris, in exile, in 1940. Harald Fuller, their half-brother, had been in prison for his left-wing leanings; now he was working to build a democratic newspaper in the American zone.

"I remember Roswitha's wedding day," said Jo with shame. "I had to wear a *velvet suit*. Holy hell, that's one memory I kept quiet about!"

"I remember the wedding," said Lucy. "Hans had a beard and a bow tie. Harald got drunk on champagne, even Papa might have been a little bit plastered. Mom wore a long dress, a formal, in the middle of the day. Aunt Helga ran about so much that she had a nervous collapse in a wicker chair, under the oak."

She was beginning to see how weird and stiff and *Teutonic* the wedding had been. The older men had worn black frock coats and top hats. There were at least no uniforms, except for the band. Harald had sprung unsteadily onto a wrought iron garden seat and accused his father of bourgeois tendencies. Papa had passed it off with a silly joke in English "I represent that remark . . . "

Lucy was surprised by another memory of the wedding day. Outside the upstairs bathroom as she looked down at the sun-drenched landing, Aunt Helga took her by the arm. She had recovered from her swoon, and she towered over Luisa, her hair damp, her face unpowdered. "Your Papa is an innocent," she whispered, "an *innocent*. These people crowding into the house . . . " Which people? At the time Lucy had had no idea, but now she saw that there had been several undesirable elements at the wedding. Artists, socialists . . . with a sinking feeling, as the plane lost altitude, Lucy included the Jews. Mom was half Jewish, which was why they had had to go into exile in the first place.

There had been more wire-pulling. Papa made the decision to stay, as he explained in Letter Four, posted at Lisbon, December 1939. He must remain in the Deutsche Sprachraum, the area where German was spoken. The Nazis had left him alone after a token arrest in '41; he had his

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little retreat in Schleswig Holstein where he wrote but published nothing, and waited until the liberal spirit was reborn.

"I remember a great place," said Jo, "the attic. We had our *Geheimbutze* there, our secret clubhouse. We used to have a Christmas party with the toy animals and the dolls. There was an old dressmaker's dummy, shaped like a dame, you know, with no head and no arms. And a little door all covered with wallpaper."

"Honest to Betsy," said Lucy, rolling her eyes, "the things you remember, *Bruderherz*."

Actually, Lucy remembered the stifling, dust-smelling playhouse in the attic very well. She had always been a little afraid of the dressmaker's dummy.

Then they were down in the cold at Rhein-Main, entirely surrounded by a reunion of Air Force husbands and wives. Two American kids in their best clothes—Jo had cuffed trousers, nicely creased, Lucy a pleated skirt and nylons. Now they appreciated the overcoats and boots that had seemed so dumb in California. They looked about nervously at their first German civilians. A tall man, emaciated, wearing a duffel coat with wooden toggles over an awful threadbare blue suit, came swinging through the crowd. He was questioned by an MP at whom he arrogantly waved documents. Lucy thought she would die.

"*Harald*!"

He was so *old*. He was so thin. His German was so hard to understand.

"Great God, look at the pair of you! Two spoiled brats from America!"

He shook hands with them both, painfully hard.

"Where's Mom?" demanded Jo. "Where's Papa?"

"Your mother hasn't renewed her driving license," said Harald. "Did you think *Papa* would appear in public? No, no, *mein Liebe*, I have to undertake this unpleasant duty."

It *was* rather unpleasant, Lucy conceded. They took an hour to get out of the building. Harald bundled them into a queer old jalopy, an Opel, and they were whirled over the autobahn, past ruined factories and plantations of young firs, to the small town of Breitbach. There was a long high wall of pinkish stone; through an iron gate in the wall, they saw gravestones and grey monuments. The day was very still, grey and cold, but there was no snow. And there was the house, set back from the road on a deep, narrow site.

"Friedhof Strasse," announced Harald to his silent passengers. "Cemetery Street."

A tall woman with ash-blonde hair was sweeping the stone path.

"Your Aunt Helga," said Harald, "Frau Fuller Krantz."

"What happened to Uncle Markus?" asked Lucy.

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She knew that it was all very sad. Her aunt had married late; Uncle Markus came back from the war and then died.

Harald scratched his head.

"Well, I'll give it to you straight," he said. "You'll get a lot of evasive nonsense in this house, but none from me, I swear it. Poor old Markus came back from the war. . . ."

"Was he a Nazi?" asked Jo.

"No, of course not," snapped Harald. "He was a decent chap, son of a bookseller in Frankfurt. He was drafted into the Wehrmacht. He was lucky enough to get back from the Russian front in July '45. He committed suicide a week later."

"In the house?" whispered Lucy.

"Hung himself over the stairs," said Harald. "He was sick, exhausted . . . I don't know . . . "

"Was Papa at home?" asked Jo.

"No," said Harald. "Still up in his little *dacha* in the northern meadows. Helga was getting the house ready."

They struggled up the path with their suitcases while Harald stayed back, tinkering with the car. Lucy could not go any further; she rubbed her gloved hands and drew her turban of blue wool jersey down over her ears. The grass was dry, the trees were bare. Where was Mom? Why didn't she come out to meet them? The separation from her mother seemed as long and hard to bear as the lifetime she had spent away from Papa.

The house was broad and high, its dark yellow plaster peeled back in places to the bricks underneath. The windows had chocolate-brown shutters folded back upon the wall, and, in the center, over the front door, there was a deep balcony of the same brown wood. Lucy remembered the balcony and its window boxes stuck with evergreen twigs. Papa's study lay behind the balcony; she felt a rush of loving apprehension . . . after so long. . . .

She looked through a gap in the untidy cypress hedge and saw a ragged figure in black. A young man ran off among the tall grass and the grey monuments, flap, flap, he was gone, like a great black bird. She picked up her suitcase and caught up to Aunt Helga and Jo. Aunt Helga pushed back Jo's curls from his forehead and tucked them under his knitted cap. She took him by the shoulders, changing her grip, and held him at arm's length.

"Oh, he *will* be pleased!" she said. "Joachim at last! Joachim, the youngest child!"

Lucy recognized her aunt, and was shocked. Only the luxuriant hair was still as beautiful as ever. Helga's face had lengthened and set; there were heavy wrinkles on her brow. She was pale; even her lips were pale.

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Lucy realized that she wore no make-up; she had a naked face, as if she had just got out of bed in the morning, but she was a little bit dressed up, in a blue woollen dress and silver drop earings. Lucy herself was wearing powder over a rachel foundation and her new peppermint-pink lipstick. Aunt Helga turned, stared, pursed her lips, and looked her niece up and down with a sigh.

"So, Luisa . . . "

She embraced her quickly.

"Go along."

She stood back with a motion of her broom and they heaved their suitcases into the house. There was Mom in the dark too-small hallway beside the Bulgarian atrocity, and she was in tears. Jo flung himself at his mother with a joyous shout.

"Ssh!" said Vicki Fuller. "Oh, my darlings, my darlings . . . "

As Lucy joined the family embrace, she remembered at last how things had been. They were hushed all day long because of Papa. But what did it matter now that they had Mom, their very own, pretty as the painted Jugendstil girl upon the hallstand mirror, girlish and slim, with Jo's dark eyes.

"Where's Papa?" cried Jo, shrugging out of his overcoat. "Is he in the study? I must go up!"

"Ssh!" said Aunt Helga as she came in. "You may go up quietly."

She laughed.

"Poor August . . . to have such a big boy burst in!"

"Go on," said Mom softly, "Go on, Jo, do you know the way?"

Jo went thundering up the stairs and Lucy went to follow him, but Aunt Helga caught her by the wrist.

"Let him go," she said. "Let him go first. You must wash your face, Luisa. Your Papa doesn't like make-up."

Lucy shook off her aunt's hand. She saw that her mother was not wearing any make-up. She knew too that Mom would be no help. She never had been in certain situations.

"Now come," said Helga. "You look like a whore who runs after the Americans."

Mom said in a shocked voice, "Helga!"

Lucy ran lightly up the stairs without looking back at the two women. There was the study door, ajar; she went inside.

Jo had drawn up short of the huge desk where his father sat. Lucy saw that Papa had not changed at all. He looked just like his photograph on the book jackets: thick white hair, white since his fortieth year, a broad mild face. He brought his sentence to an end and looked up, shy and charming.

"Well, are you here?" he said.

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He held out an arm on either side of his chair. Jo ran around the desk and was gathered up, but Lucy came more slowly. Her father stared at her as she approached.

"A film star," he said.

Then he held them, one on either side, and a wave of sadness passed over his face.

"I thought I would never see my little ones again."

"Papa," whispered Jo, "is Hitler really dead?"

"I hope so," said August Fuller devoutly.

"Papa, is it true about the horror camps?" asked Lucy, not to be outdone.

Even as she asked she realized what a foolish question it was. Harald, her own brother, was surely a victim of some camp. Had he been in *Belsen*?

"I will say this," said Papa, "I will say this, my dear children. The misery will never end. They will be counting the dead and arguing about the guilt for another fifty years."

"Papa," said Jo, "I'm going to give you an early present."

Their luggage was stuffed with presents. Now Jo drew from his trouser pocket a dime-store puzzle; tiny ball bearings had to be rolled into the eyes of a tiger. Lucy left them rolling the puzzle this way and that, and walked to the balcony doors. Far away there was a sound of children's voices, from a backyard or a playground. She looked out at the dead garden, and wished it would snow.

There was a gap two trees wide in the cypress hedge. A young man in black, perhaps the same who had flapped away at their approach, stood in the long grass of the cemetery, gazing up at the house. She could see his black curly hair and his pale face. He wore a long, black coat, not exactly an overcoat. Lucy could see neat graves with flowers and raked paths laid out beyond the wilderness.

Aunt Helga came to collect Lucy and Jo.

"Visiting time is over," she said briskly, like a hospital matron.

Jo was as balky as a six year old. He wanted to stay with Papa. He wrenched his arm away from Aunt Helga's firm grip and protested loudly in English.

"For crying out loud! We just got here!"

Lucy looked at her father. With a faint gentle smile, he laid aside the puzzle and picked up his fountain pen. Aunt Helga chased Jo around the desk. Papa sat like a man under a bell jar and let his sister hunt his youngest child out of the room. As they passed Lucy, Aunt Helga said, "You too! You too, Luisa!"

Lucy glanced down and saw that the young man in black had gone away. They followed Aunt Helga up to their old bedrooms, which they

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had shared with Harald and Roswitha. Lucy liked her room well enough, and tried not to think of the sunny bedroom at the O'Briens', all ruffles and polka-dots. The suitcases had been brought up, so Mom and Lucy unpacked and laughed and looked at farewell snapshots of Oakland, CA. When he had changed into his sneakers, Jo was allowed to go exploring. At last Mom went back to her typewriter downstairs and Aunt Helga said, "Come, Luisa!"

They carried the empty suitcases up to the third floor, where Helga slept, then up the narrow attic stair. There was a tiny landing with a window that looked out onto the slates. Lucy glanced anxiously at the stair rails, wondering about Uncle Markus. The long attic was partitioned off into small rooms, well-swept, and reeking of mothballs. The skylights were covered with brown paper. Sure enough, there was a version of their playhouse, with an old sofa and a heavy wardrobe against a partition. In one corner lurked the dressmaker's dummy, draped in a net curtain like a headless bride. There was a soft thump on the stairs and Jo came in, flushed with excitement.

"We used to play here!" he said. "I remember!"

"Oh, Joachim . . . " said Aunt Helga gently.

They stood beside her and saw that there was a field grey uniform stretched at full length upon the couch: nearby stood a pair of worn boots.

"A sad place for us all," she said. "My poor Markus . . . "

Subdued, they trooped out, and Aunt Helga locked the door at the top of the stairs.

"It would be pretty cold for a clubhouse, I guess," sighed Jo.

At five o'clock, they went down to the dining room for a meal of rye bread, margarine, plum jam, mettwurst, and awful sour plumcake covered with half-raw plums. Mom lit the first candle on the advent wreath of tannen and pine, decorated with gilded cones. There was nothing Lucy and Jo could drink except water. They tried disgusting peppermint tea and unrefrigerated skim milk. Jo spoke wistfully of Thanksgiving, and Aunt Helga asked, thanksgiving for *what*? At half past five, Aunt Helga cried, "Go up, go up, little Vicki . . . he will be waiting!"

Vicki carried up a tray to her husband. When Jo tried to follow, Aunt Helga held him in his chair with her hands on his shoulders.

"Hush," she said, "you must understand. It is their time together."

"Do *we* get any time with our father?" asked Lucy.

The irony was lost on Helga. She smiled benignly.

"I have been thinking," she said. "You might be permitted to go along on August's walk."

"Permitted?" cried Jo, "are you mad? You're not my parent . . . *he* is!"

Aunt Helga smacked Jo across the face. Lucy, filled with instant

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strength, like Superman, sprang up from her place, pushed her aunt aside, and shielded her brother.

"How dare you!" she shouted. "Mom! Papa! She hit Jo in the face!"

No one came or questioned; the dining room was a long way from the study. Aunt Helga collapsed into her chair and burst into tears. Jo jumped up angrily and padded out of the room.

"I should not have hit the boy," said Aunt Helga, turning to Lucy with a dreadful tear-stained face. "Luisa, dearest child, it has been so difficult to care for your father. To give him conditions in which he could work, to protect him from interruption."

"Jo will go to Papa and Mom," said Lucy.

"Oh, August will send him away," said Aunt Helga. "It is his time alone with little Vicki."

She sipped her peppermint tea and said, "I was sure I would die when the arrest took place. August was so brave. We had a tip, we were always well-informed. He walked down the path carrying his hat and coat. He did not want them in the house."

"Who came for him?" asked Lucy. "What did they look like?"

"Two men in soft hats and raincoats," said Aunt Helga. "August said to me 'Such a cliché . . . ' We had fugitives in the house, he sacrificed himself for them. He was speaking to the men; I was stationed at the front door; Frau Rothmeier and the children had fled into the back garden, then through the hedge into the cemetery. No one would look there, under the old trees. We did it at every serious alarm, but it was more difficult in winter."

Frau Fuller Krantz wept again, her face crumpled.

"Oh Luisa, it was so terrible . . . "

"Please, please don't cry," said Lucy, as warmly and sympathetically as she could. "Papa is fine. We're all here."

"I waited at the Praesidium in Darmstadt for thirty-six hours," said Aunt Helga. "Went to the ladies' toilet in a large store and washed my hands and face. Ate a bread roll and drank coffee. I came back to this house on the bus and managed to get through by telephone to an American businessman in Berlin, Mr. Walker. I didn't bother about secrecy, I said straight out: August Fuller has been arrested. I lay down for a few hours just as I was, but I had Frau Rothmeier wake me. I changed my clothes and set out on my bicycle all over Breitbach, to the police, to the town hall, to a very cultivated man from the Labor Front, a party intellectual who had a villa on the Steinberg. I like to think it all helped. In three days, August was free. It was at this time, the autumn of '41, that we decided to go to Schleswig Holstein, to the little hut on the Mariensee."

"You saved Papa," said Lucy. "You were very brave, Aunt Helga."

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Her aunt smiled at last. They sat in silence before clearing the table. It was dark outside, and there was only candlelight in the room, from the advent wreath. There was no heating, and a heavy chill was seeping into the house. Far away there were monotonous bursts of tapping and hammering, as if some amateur carpenter were patching some other house to keep out the cold. Suddenly, Lucy heard a wailing cry, dampened by distance, and a soft, horrible thump.

"Did you hear that?"

It was hardly necessary to ask; Aunt Helga had heard nothing.

"Really," said Lucy, "it sounded as if someone . . . *fell down.*"

Helga's face became set and disapproving.

"I'm surprised at Harald, filling you up with these sad tales."

"What sad tales?"

"Enough!" said Aunt Helga. "We will clear, and if you are a good girl, you may have a tiny glass of elderberry wine."

They went down a few steps into the kitchen, which didn't smell of cookies any more. There was a pervading reek of smoke from the stove. All cleaners were in short supply: soap, washing powder, polish, spirits. There was sand to scour the pots and pans. When the washing up was done, Lucy opened the back door and looked into the yard. The night was undark; it was just beginning to snow. There was the old swing, moving to and fro as if Luisa, nine years old, had just run indoors.

"*Oh I remember. . . .*"

"I call it the children's playground," said Aunt Helga. "Joachim should see this. I strung up all the colored lights we had left. When I think how we filled this yard with colored lanterns in summer and colored lights in the Christmas season. I think of all the children: Roswitha, Harald, Luisa, Joachim . . ."

"There were children in the house, hiding . . ."

"Yes, even the little Rothmeiers. They were so quiet and good, but in the dusk they ran about like mad things. This yard can't be seen from the street."

Aunt Helga threw the switch and half a dozen colored bulbs flowered in the half darkness, strung from the clothesline to the garden shed. Lucy walked down into the garden among the phantom children running about so wildly. Roswitha was dead, Harald was thin and old, Jo was a displaced person, Luisa had become Lucy. Aunt Helga called and came after her. She put her into an old cloth coat and a pair of ankle boots.

"Aunt Helga, what became of the Rothmeiers?" asked Lucy.

Helga stood at the top of the steps, holding out her arms to the playground and the lights.

"They were saved!" she said. "We saved the family, your Papa and I. They all came safely to Palestine."

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Lucy went stomping carefully across the lawn, which was lightly sprinkled with snow that was not sticking very well. The swing was in an iron frame painted white; the enamel was lumpy and rust-spotted. She stood against the back wall of ancient pinkish stone and turned to look at the house.

She was pierced with cold. She had never been so cold in her life. Her whole body was shivering, her teeth chattered, her face was stiff with cold. She could not stir from her place against the wall. The house was oddly lit, red and green in luminous patches from the colored lights. The figure of a man was standing on the roof, not far from the catwalk and the sloped iron ladder for the chimney sweep. In deathly silence, the man side-stepped and fell, face downwards, his black coat billowing out. Lucy knew the sounds that he had made: the wailing horrid cry, the brief passage of a body through the air, and the moist thump upon the snowy ground below.

She was trapped, unable to call for help, unable to think clearly about what she had seen. Gradually, the ordinary sounds of the night began to return. Aunt Helga shut a cupboard door. A car horn sounded, blocks away. A dog howled. Lucy ran shuddering for the back door and paused to glance around the corner of the house. Nothing lay on the ground.

She dragged herself back inside, hung up her coat, switched off the lights at Aunt Helga's command. She was like a sleepwalker. The bell rang at the front door.

"It is Harald," said Aunt Helga. "Let him in."

She fell against him in the hallway, gasping for breath.

"Now, now," he said. "How did you get so cold? What has upset you, Lucy?"

He dumped his coat and books in the library, where he slept. Then he led her into the warmed sitting room and sat her on the couch.

"What *is* all this?"

"What is the sad tale about someone who fell off the roof?"

Harald still carried his briefcase. Now he drew out a bottle of Coca-Cola and an opener. Lucy gulped the soda as if it were the elixir of life.

"It *is* a sad tale," said Harald, "and also a mystery. We are not even sure that he *did* fall off the roof. And if he did, no one has the least idea of what he was doing there. This gets unpleasant . . . "

He took a sip of Coke.

"He was not found, you see. The house was empty. Papa was in his lake-dwelling with Helga. I was in Theresienstadt. It was not until 1944 that Old Schultz, who used to do a bit of gardening here, came hunting for firewood. He found him lying there. He had been dead for years. His neck was broken."

"But who on earth *was* it?"

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"Didn't I say? It was poor young Stein. Solomon Stein, Frau Rothmeier's brother. She used to slip out and meet him sometimes."

"But surely *some*one noticed that he was missing!"

"I'm sure they did," said Harald bitterly. "He was on some deportation list, headed for the last round-up. His family were long gone."

"He was trying to shelter in the house," said Lucy firmly.

"Possibly."

"He *did* fall off the roof," she said, watching Harald very closely. "I heard the sounds and I saw him fall."

Harald shook his head from side to side.

"You are as bad as Papa and his nightmares!" he said.

She saw that she had come to some frontier that he could not cross; he was not battling with his unbelief, but with her unreason.

A voice cried joyfully, "Children! Helga!"

Vicki was calling; she walked slowly, majestically, down the stairs, arm in arm with August himself. Papa was making a special occasion, he was breaking his routine for them all. There was an instant response: Helga came with a bottle of wine, Harald stoked up the stove. Everyone spoke at once and crowded into the sitting room. The advent candle was lit again, the radio was switched on and a Strauss waltz was playing. Was it "Morning Papers?" "Wine, Women, and Song"?

"Wrong!" cried August. "It is Artists' Life!"

But where was Jo? Lucy ran up three flights and looked into his bedroom. In the feeble light of the bedside lamp he was lying curled up on his bed, sound asleep. His face had an unhealthy pallor, his forehead was damp. His hands lay palm upward, filthy with dust, the same thick dust that clung to the cuffs of his trousers. She shook him roughly awake.

"Jo! Jo! Papa is downstairs!"

Jo looked at her with unseeing eyes, black, glistening pools. He was always hard to wake.

"Are you okay?"

"I threw up," he said.

"Papa is downstairs. Will you stay sick or come down?"

He swung off the bed, and she followed him to the echoing bathroom. He washed his hands and face in cold water and stared into the glass. Lucy was impatient and frightened. He was only her kid brother, but who would be left for her if he slipped away?

They went down to the bosom of the family. August was in top form, playing up shamelessly to each of his children in turn. How they laughed. How Lucy blushed. How Harald's harsh jokes crackled from one end of the room to the other. Mom perched on the arm of Papa's big leather chair. Over the mantelpiece was a large aquarelle of a sweet-faced girl in a green dress melting into the flowery depths of an orchard. It was

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Nina, the first wife, mother of poor Roswitha and of Harald. She had been Helga's schoolfriend.

Helga was persuaded to go to the piano at last, although she protested that it needed tuning. She began with "Stille Nacht," "Silent Night"; everyone joined in, slowly, tentatively. Jo's beautiful unbroken alto rose up alongside August's fine light baritone and Helga's trained soprano. When the first verse was over they stopped, amazed. Vicki began to cry.

"It is *over*," said August. "It is really all over at last. We are all together again. We can start to live!"

Lucy was overcome by compassion. Poor things, she thought, poor old things. Aunt Helga swung into "O Tannenbaum" and Harald cried, "Now there's a good tune!" Then, intoxicated by the warmth and the wine and the Christmas music, they caroled away at "Every year the Christchild comes again" and "Ring, ring little bell," with Jo doing the solo for the Christchild who asks to be let in from the cold. Lucy and Jo and Mom began *a capella* with "White Christmas" and "Away in a Manger," but Aunt Helga soon played along. After a few bars she could fake it.

In a pause for refreshment after a bracket of Santa Claus numbers, Jo said, "Aunt Helga, what happened to my toy tiger?"

"Oh, Jo," said Mom.

"No, I need him," said Jo. "And there was a teddy and a wooden horse. A whole box of things we couldn't take."

"Hush," said Mom, "I expect they're somewhere about."

"Joachim, you're a big boy," said Aunt Helga. "Why in the world do you want those old toys?"

"I want to give them to the refugee children," said Jo, reddening. "There was an appeal, you know, on the radio."

Everyone was amused yet approving. Everyone but Lucy, who knew that for some reason Jo was lying, most persuasively.

"It does you credit, Joachim," said Aunt Helga in a quiet careful voice. "The toys have gone. They *were* given to refugee children. To the little Rothmeiers who stayed here."

It put an instant damper on the party. Harald said fiercely, "They were born and brought up in Germany and they became *refugees* overnight. Rosa and Benny Rothmeier and the baby. *Not* one of our greatest successes."

August was up in arms, arguing with Harald until they were both shouting. Poor organization! A complete farce! It couldn't be helped. Would he blame Helga? Frau Rothmeier herself had a grave responsibility. The wonder was that they did not *all* end up in prison!

"Aunt Helga," cried Lucy, "you said they were saved, that they all came safely to Palestine!"

"Make that the Promised Land," said Harald, "poor little devils . . . "

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"I lied to you, Luisa," said Aunt Helga. "It is too sad."

The Rothmeier family had been picked up . . . arrested . . . on the edge of town, as they waited for the car that was taking them to the Swiss border.

"God, God, what could I do?" said Aunt Helga, wringing her hands. "I helped Frau Rothmeier button their coats and put on their overshoes. In the evening, when I was giving thanks for their escape, there came the telephone call from Herr Stein, the brother. The car had arrived late . . . he had seen his sister and the children arrested. Poor fellow, I think this sent him mad. Next day I went to take care of August. My bags were packed. . . . It had taken weeks to get the necessary permit."

"Are you sure the Rothmeiers all . . . are gone?" whispered Vicki. "The mother and the three little children?"

"I'm sure!" snapped Harald.

"We have an inquiry running with the Red Cross," said August heavily. "I mentioned something of this in my letters to America. But it is foolish to hope."

Nevertheless Lucy did hope, from that moment. She found herself turning to the front windows of the house, upstairs or down. She looked out, dreaming, and saw them coming down the path. They were thin as Harald but grown into hardy waifs, twelve, ten, seven years old, clutching a toy tiger, a teddy bear, a little wooden horse.

She enjoyed this day-dreaming much more than her actual dreams, which were cold and filled with anxiety. She saw Jo with a dead look on his face, his lips moving as if in prayer. There was a tapping, scraping, boring sound that went on and on, and was sometimes like a voice, the Christchild or the lost children, wanting to come in. She woke at night hearing her father utter a strange roaring cry, coming out of his nightmare, and her mother soothing him to sleep again.

On the eve of the sixth of December, St. Nicholas's Day, everyone put out a shoe on the mezzanine near the door of the study. The adults persuaded the children to do so and vice versa. Lucy and Jo provided carefully chosen little gifts from their store, perfume, soap, socks, and what did they receive in return?

"They *have* to be kidding," said Jo.

"Ssh," said Lucy, sounding like Mom or Aunt Helga. "We get our real presents on Christmas Eve . . . "

It was an old joke that no one remembered. In the olden days, kids had to be satisfied with *much less* at Christmas: in fact, with an orange and a bag of nuts.

It was a quarter to six, bitterly cold, and pitch dark. The electricity would be off for another two hours: they had filled shoes and found their own presents with the help of Jo's flashlight. Soon Aunt Helga would

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come down to stoke up the banked kitchen range by candlelight. They sat on the stairs, fully dressed in trousers and sweaters under their dressing gowns, and sniffed at the oranges.

"I will go home," said Jo.

"You can't," said Lucy, not pretending to misunderstand. "You're too young. You have to stay with Mom."

"She'll see it my way," said Jo, with steely determination.

"Papa has plans for you."

"Papa can come and see me in America. He should have gone with us in the first place."

"Jo, they're all doing their best . . . even Aunt Helga."

"She's mean," said Jo, kneading his orange. "This is a creepy place. Think of Uncle Markus and the poor guy who fell off the roof."

"That was the war," said Lucy. "Jo, you have to stay here."

"This whole house is no better than one of those concentration camps."

Lucy was shocked and angry.

"You're out of your mind!" she said coldly. "Do you have any idea how bad it was in those places?"

"Yes!" said Jo.

Aunt Helga came down the creaking stairs and discovered the present in her old blue velvet slipper.

"Lavender soap!" she cried. "After all these years!"

August was driven out by Harald to give readings from his works, and radio interviews; he received his publishers' representatives in the study. There were other changes in routine because the children were being prepared to enter a German high school. Even Lucy must do a year in the *Gymnasium* before trying for a university place. Mom coached them in math and Harald in German grammar. It was generally conceded that the writing of perfect grammatical German was so difficult that Lucy and Jo might never master it sufficiently to qualify for certain professions.

August discovered—with a shocked look, one snowy afternoon as they trudged after him through the streets of Breitbach—that Lucy had read every one of his novels in the original and in translation. He set aside two hours, twice a week, to coach her in literature. They began to argue and expound very freely. Then each would stop, amazed: Lucy because this was the man, the author, who spoke, August because this fierce American girl was his own daughter. Aunt Helga, coming to end the seminar, had a proverb: "Children turn into People."

The snow was deeper now, and everyone was pleased, because Breitbach did not always have a white Christmas. The coldest months were those two generals who had defeated Napoleon further north: January and February. Lucy, ranging about the study one afternoon, looked from

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the window and became cold. The young man was much nearer, right in the grounds, staring up at the house with an expression of misery and terror that froze the blood.

"Papa," she whispered, "there is someone in the garden!"

"What's the matter?" said August. "Is it someone after firewood?"

Far away in the reaches of the house there was a burst of tapping, a crescendo of little rapping sounds that rose up and then were still. They both heard the sounds, Lucy was sure of it.

"I see a young man with black hair," she said quickly. "He wears this long black coat . . . with a patch of yellow."

August gave a startled exclamation and hurried to the window. They looked down together, but the young man had gone. They were gazing at an unmarked patch of snow. They had both turned pale.

"It was Stein, young Stein," said August, "wearing his Star of David."

"He came from the cemetery," said Lucy.

"He is buried there," said August, "in the wilderness. That is the Jewish cemetery, divided from the rest. I think he was the very last to be buried in that place, after he was found . . . behind the house."

August sank down on the window seat beside the balcony door and put his head in his hands.

"I dream of him," he said. "It is one of my nightmares. I see him on the path and run towards him crying 'Come in, come in . . .' but he turns away from me because my house is accursed. My whole life, my work, my country, all accursed . . . "

"Do you hear . . . knocking sounds?" asked Lucy, very low.

"Yes," said August, "and scratching, and nibbling . . . the rats and mice working away at the foundations of the house . . . "

"Oh Papa," cried Lucy, taking him in her arms. "It will be all right again. Everything will be all right. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve!"

She looked down into the snowy garden again and screamed aloud. It was not young Stein who stood there, looking up with a terrible expression, but Jo, her brother. He flung a large snowball and it landed on the balcony. The next moment Aunt Helga came into the picture and hustled him away, raining smart little blows upon the shoulders of his coat. Lucy saw that her scream had been too much for Papa, who hated loud noises. He returned to his desk, shaking his handsome head; their study of literature was finished for the day.

There was a problem about where to raise the tree. The small room downstairs with blue curtains was Vicki's typing room now, full of precious manuscripts. The tree was brought in semi-secretly by Harald and placed in the dining room. Aunt Helga shooed everyone away and set to work.

Late in the afternoon, Lucy sat with her mother in the typing room

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and Jo came to join them. It was Christmas Eve, so they were dressed in their best clothes. There was something very much the matter with Jo. He had grown two inches, his face was thin, he had an odd way of clenching his teeth when he spoke. All the grown-ups had spoken the word "puberty" in Lucy's presence, but she was not quite convinced. Well sure, puberty maybe, but what *else*? What was he up to? Now he sat with them, looking old and sick, a little like Harald, thumbing through the carbon copies of his father's letters to Luisa and Joachim in America.

They waited for the Christchild. Once Harald stuck his head into the room. He collected their wrapped presents to put under the tree and made everyone look for Aunt Helga's keys . . . she was turning the house upside down looking for her keys. He asked if they had their party pieces ready. Both Lucy and Jo, as the youngest, were expected to recite or read aloud at the feast.

"You needn't be afraid," said Mom nervously when Harald had gone. "Jo? I'm sure Lucy is not afraid."

"*Afraid*!" said Jo scornfully. "Afraid of reading something to those guys . . . "

Then he was sorry and he embraced Mom. Aunt Helga peeped in and said, "Vicki . . . Vicki . . . You must do your share!"

She smiled roguishly at Lucy and Jo.

"You two must wait for the ringing of the little silver bell."

When they were alone, Jo jumped up and said, "I always thought you had a lot of nerve for a girl."

His manner was desperate and strange; she knew he was asking for her help.

"Here," he said. "Read this page from Papa's letter. Read it to *them*. If you can't figure it out, Harald sure as hell will."

He had another present, a smallish cardboard carton clumsily wrapped in American Christmas paper.

"This is for the whole family," he said.

"Jo," she said, "Jo, if this is *running away*, it is truly a very dumb thing for you to do."

"It's not running away," he said. "Just the opposite. You can come too . . . where I'm going. Oh, I almost forgot . . . For Aunt Helga."

He fished in the pocket of his sports coat and drew out the bunch of keys. Then he snatched up Mom's beautiful vicuna lap robe and ran out of the room. Lucy heard him go upstairs. She began to read the page from Letter twelve, which was dated November 1941.

"I have hidden away a great many books," wrote Papa, "to save them from the fire that is devouring our country. I think of all the secret places, in garden colonies, in the deep woods, in attics and cellars throughout

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the land, where men and women of goodwill have hidden those who are persecuted.

"A mother and her three children are hiding in our house, which I hope you still remember. I hardly know the children's names. When there is the least threat of danger they are hidden in a little room high up under the slates. They have learned to sit very still.

"I think of the oversized and inhuman monuments which this Warlord and his henchmen have set up in Germany. These vainglorious monuments will fall into dust and ashes. Only the secret places will abide, and the memory; the spirits of the men and women and the children who sheltered in these places will remain in them forever."

Lucy was puzzled and terrified. She was standing at the brink of an abyss. A sound began to penetrate . . . it was the ringing of the little silver bell. She walked slowly across the hall carrying Jo's package but she could not slip into the dining room unnoticed. Everyone was waiting, even Papa. Lucy received the full impact of the beautiful tree, just as she remembered it, blazing with real candles. She saw the strips of silver lammetta, the lovely baubles of colored glass, the legions of wooden angels and the silver star at the top.

"Where is Jo?" they cried. "But where is Jo?"

"He had to go to the toilet," said Lucy. "He was nervous."

Everyone laughed. Aunt Helga had a very suitable proverb: "Eine schöne Bescherung," which meant "a fine howdy-do" as well as a fine sharing out of gifts at Christmas time.

"Lucy," said Harald, "what's the matter?"

Lucy still stood there, unable to move, clutching the messily swaddled package. The scene began to unfold in slow motion, so smoothly that she could almost believe in the intervention of some higher power.

Papa and Mom stood beside their chairs at the dining table, which was covered with plates of sweets, oranges, and nuts, one for every member of the family. Aunt Helga was the only one seated, fanning herself with a paper fan, warding off another nervous collapse after her exertions. Harald snatched the carbon of the letter from Lucy.

"Jo said you would understand," she whispered.

She went forward slowly to keep from sinking down onto the carpet. She placed the bunch of keys before Aunt Helga, and then put the package in the very center of the table. She began stripping off the paper, and found that her guess was correct. The package smelled awful; it stank of dust and corruption. She wanted to rub her hands and arms where they had touched the wrapper. Her voice was loud, out of control.

"This is from Jo . . . for all the family."

"A key is missing!" said Aunt Helga.

"What in the name of God . . . ?" said Papa.

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Lucy folded back the top of the carton, but she could only take out one thing and set it on the damask cloth. It was old and horribly stained, and there were dark threads adhering to the plush; it was a toy tiger. Harald uttered some growling sound and swiftly emptied the carton. There were six vile reeking dusty objects upon the table top.

"The children's overshoes. *Their overshoes*!" said Harald, his voice rising to a shout.

He felt among the overshoes and discovered that some of them were not empty. He snatched up a napkin and wiped his fingers. Then he handed Papa his own letter.

"What if Frau Rothmeier was picked up alone?" Harald said. "She went out to meet her brother, and left the children in their hiding place . . . "

"It's not possible," said Mom. "What you are saying is not possible. The children . . . "

After a long silence Papa said very gently:

"Helga . . . ?"

There was a sudden loud splashing sound, it went on and on, then a stink of hot urine filled the room. Aunt Helga turned brick-red and went into hysterics, half laughing, half crying. No one dared to slap her face. Lucy stepped backwards from the damp carpet; a red ball fell off the Christmas tree.

"I was going to August," said Aunt Helga. "My bags were packed. It had taken so long to get the permit . . . "

Lucy kept on walking backwards until she was at the door. Papa and Harald began to speak, both at once. She slipped out of the room and began to run up the stairs, softly, lightly, as if she were flying. She climbed up and up and the attic door was open, the key in the lock. She went in, breathing the mothball reek; the attic was bitterly cold; the skylights were crusted with frost flowers. Jo had candles stuck to an old plate; the couch was covered with a rug and the lap robe. She sat there quietly, and the door of the wardrobe moved. Jo came out. He sat beside her, and, without embarrassment, they held hands.

"There was a door covered with wallpaper," said Lucy. "She moved the wardrobe in front of it."

"Maybe they always did that," said Jo.

"You stole the key today or yesterday," she said. "How did you get in before that?"

"From the roof," he said. "Out the landing window and in through the skylight. It was always a secret clubhouse."

He might have fallen, she thought. He came here all alone and found his way into the hidden room. He found the children. He grew thin and old and said nothing.

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". . . got a board off the back of the wardrobe," Jo was saying. "Then I broke into the room. It wasn't so hard. I was just looking for the box of toys."

"Solomon Stein figured out where they were," said Lucy. "He was trying to save them. He was trying to get in."

Lucy began to weep at last; she felt hot tears running down her cold cheeks.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I can't help thinking . . . "

The icy cold. The darkness. They were very good, very still, but at last they began calling, tapping, scraping, like mice gnawing at the fabric of the house . . . the empty house.

"Is it very bad in there?" she asked. "Could I . . . ?"

What did she mean? Could I get in through the narrow door? Could I bear it? She thought of her dream or vision of Jo sitting at a table with a dead look. In the end, she opened the wardrobe and peered through the small opening behind it. Jo had broken the door off its hinges. Inside, he had made a small heap of tannen branches covering the bodies of the two older children, Rosa and Benny, and a smaller heap for the baby on its moldering pillow. The air was still very foul. The room was no bigger than a cupboard; it shared a corner of one large skylight. Looking into the room, you could *almost* feel what it must have been like for them . . .

"She knew their mother would never come back," said Jo. "She left them there and went away to take care of Papa, and never told anyone."

"Oh yes," said Lucy, "I think she did."

She turned her head to look at the poor dressmaker's dummy; Jo had draped the field grey army tunic around its shoulders.

"I think she told Uncle Markus."

She remembered what Harald had said. Markus Krantz was a decent fellow, and had committed suicide soon after returning home from the Russian front.

Presently, Jo said, "What will happen? What will they do?"

Lucy shook her head. She had lost the power to predict the actions of any of the adults. She could only identify with Jo and with the dead children.

They sat in the candlelight, waiting for a step upon the attic stairs.●

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dow that is the most fun to play with. The window presents a three-dimensional picture of the battlefield, with rolling hills, ravines, gullies, and mountains. You can also insert towns and other landmarks. And, as if you were filming the whole thing for the evening news, you can choose to look at the field from any of the eight cardinal directions. You can even zoom in on the view from your chosen direction. An Auto-zoom feature can be selected, and the computer will bring you up close to any important clashes. It can be amazing to study the opposing forces, circling the battlefield, discovering points of weakness, zooming in to see which units are involved, and how they are faring.

The "Run Simulation" phase of the Simulator is broken into phases. Battle Commands are issued to all units that the player wishes to act, selecting Maneuver, Attack, Defend, or Reserve (raising its morale factor). The player also selects the battle logic to be used by the computer. This can help handicap the computer. If you're feeling confident, you can allow the computer to make its best decisions. Or you can force it to either always attack, always defend, or press on in just one direction.

Combat occurs, as it does in most wargames, when opposing units are adjacent. The computer calculates the strength of opposing units and then displays the results. Forces with ranged weapons, anything from crossbow to laser cannons, can also attack at the appropriate distance. The program can also provide updated battle analyses, giving a percentage of casualties absorbed by both forces . . . presented rather grimly by a pie chart. The detail in the program is immense, from the carefully researched Order of Battle in the Scenario Handbook, to the remarkable topographical map menu.

Much like Steve Jackson Games' GURPS (Generic Universal Role-Playing System), the *UMS* is a great "What-if" toy. Here's an example. At the back of the User Manual, in a Q & A section, there's this question . . . someone has been researching the battle of Gettysburg for fifteen years and thinks that Little Round Top should be moved 150 yards to the East. Can the UMS do it? No problem.

And would different terrain have prevented Napoleon's Waterloo? Try it. And how about pulse rifles at the Battle of Hastings? Sure, why not.

Certainly science fiction and fantasy writers could make interesting use of this military time machine. Rainbird also plans on releasing scenario discs for other battles, leading up to modern warfare and beyond.

The *UMS* is an exciting piece of software . . . still very much a game, but also something that lets you play with history. ●

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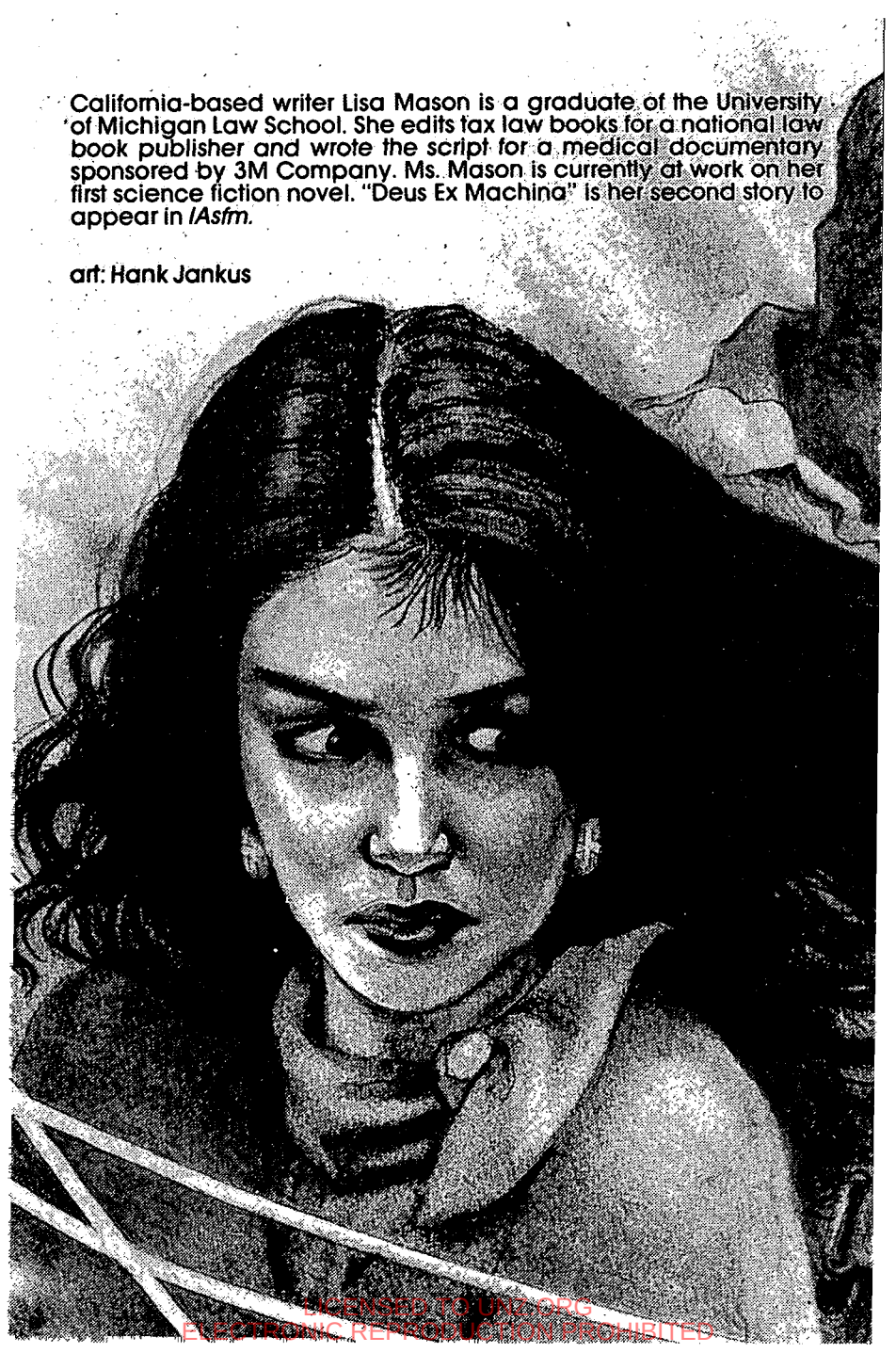
California-based writer Lisa Mason is a graduate of the University of Michigan Law School. She edits tax law books for a national law book publisher and wrote the script for a medical documentary sponsored by 3M Company. Ms. Mason is currently at work on her first science fiction novel. "Deus Ex Machina" is her second story to appear in *IAsfm.*

art: Hank Jankus



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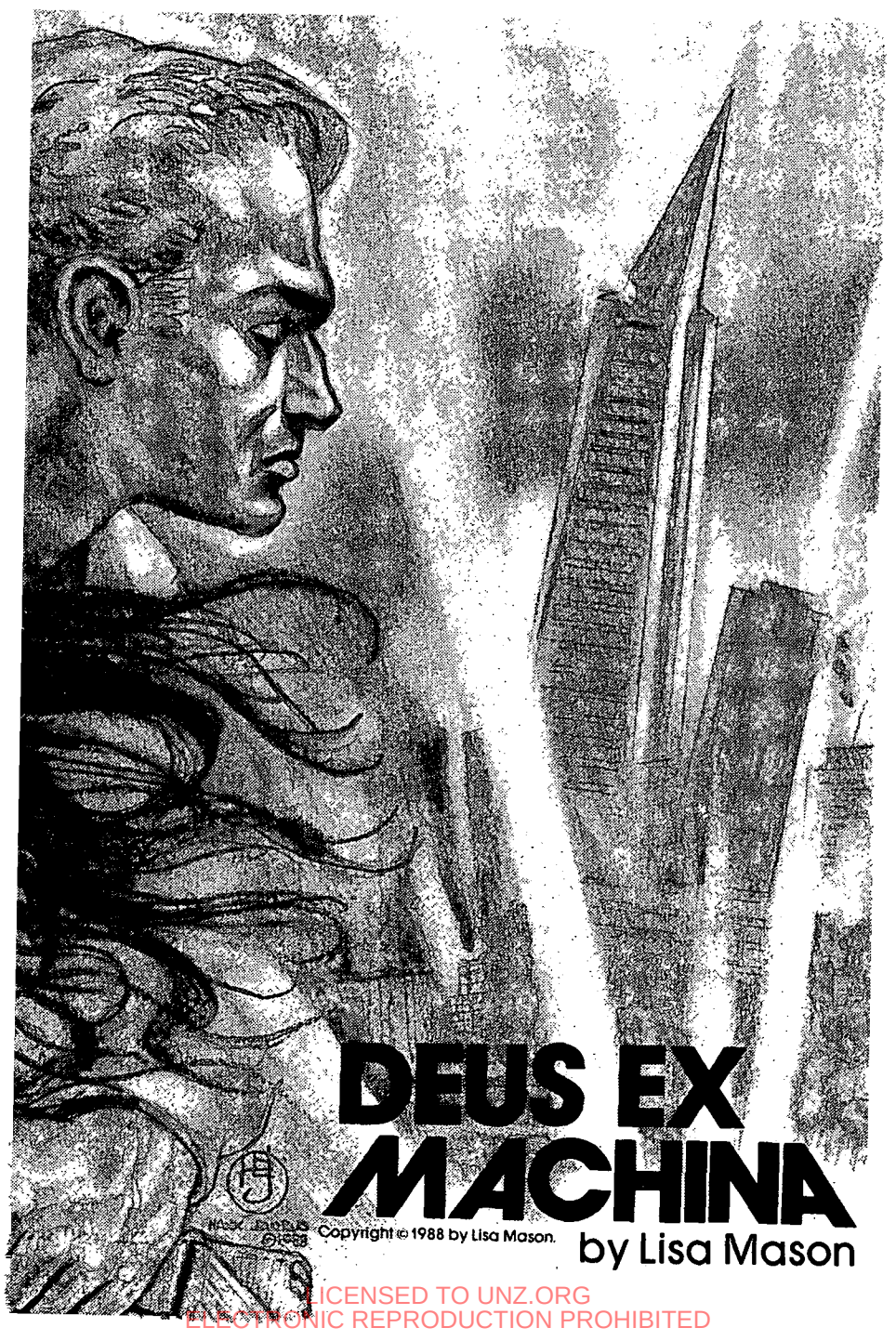

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by Lisa Mason

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Danni Roberts was on the twenty-second floor of Three Embarcadero Center when the birds began to twitter. She sat sipping morning coffee, watching the last lap of the rush hour crawl across the Oakland-Bay Bridge into downtown San Francisco. The birds, some sort of dirty brown sparrow, gathered in a swarm outside her window. Diving, swooping, forming strange organic patterns against the bleary sun. They began to twitter in earnest now, louder, screeching, growing frenzied. Sounding not like birds anymore, but some other feral creature, weasels or rats.

The birds roused Danni from her nine A.M. stupor into mild surprise. A hollow booming sound rose out of the fog. Her windows began to rattle. Flagpoles tossed to and fro on the Union Bank Building, One Pine Street, Philip Johnson's highrise masterpiece.

The earthquake struck.

The quake started with a long, rolling shudder, just like the five point five last year. Danni had been in this very same office, except then she'd been a technical writer, and now she was a managing editor. Someone in the hall outside her office yelled, "Shake-n-quake!" The Pilot Fineliners strewn across her desk rolled, the Bolinas pottery on her sill clinked and tottered. Her PC screen flickered. In the cubicles, the copy editors laughed, and someone screamed, half in fright, half in fun. Just like last year.

Danni grabbed her purse, her trench coat, the first aid kit she kept in her bottom left-hand drawer. Without a second's hesitation, she fled the southeast corner editorial offices of Jason & Co. Publishing, Inc., to the heart of Embarcadero Three. In the interior hallway, where the elevators and bathrooms were, she found the very same coat closet she'd used last year, flung herself inside, and secured the door behind her. Burrowing past winter wools and leather jackets, she found the same inside corner where she crouched into a ball.

They said last year that the five point five only lasted thirty seconds. But in the dark, in the isolation, the horrifying sensation of a thirty-seven story, multi-ton highrise quivering like some frail ticky-tack had seemed to last forever. Crying quietly into someone's raincoat, Danni had felt dizzy and disoriented for the whole hour it took Jack and Eddie to find her. They had stumbled into her closet at last, calling, "Hee-re chick chick chick! Chick chick chickie?" And after that they had ribbed her unmercifully for two weeks straight.

She was vexed. Danni Roberts wasn't normally a cry baby or a scaredy-cat. She backpacked alone at Yosemite twice a year to clear her mind of city clutter. She rode horses at Stinson Beach and roared with laughter when, the last time, a spunky little buckskin mare took the bit into her teeth and galloped straight up the side of a eucalyptus-scented ravine. Danni loved to dance, played a decent game of racketball. And she made

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regular Friday happy hour appearances at Perry's or The Holding Company, with or without an avowed friend.

But earthquakes?

Earthquakes were her one phobia. For some women it was snakes or heights or men. For Danni, quakes. They were her recurring anxiety nightmare of impending doom from which she ran and ran, unable to escape except into sweaty, heart-pounding wakefulness.

It was totally ridiculous, of course. She loved San Francisco, had moved here from Pennsylvania ten years ago and never regretted one minute. And she knew very well California was earthquake country, figured she could deal with that.

She'd experienced her first shaker not two months after she'd moved to the penthouse studio in Noe Valley. A classic four point six on the Richter scale. The windows had rattled, the timbers creaked, tiny cracks sprang into the ceiling plaster. The apartment building was thirty years old, but built to code. That weird, rocking sensation; the whole floor moving under her feet, the whole *room* moving all around her. Gravity defied for a powerful, yet almost subtle, moment. It should have been yet another interesting phenomenon in Danni's life. A bit of excitement, an experience. Like going to a rock concert for the first time.

But it wasn't.

She got dizzy, almost nauseous. Her pulse began to pound, her breath to catch. The silly little four point six had terrified the shit out of her.

She read up on stress management, took a workshop on overcoming fears, tried to condition herself to aversion. She moved from the penthouse studio in Noe Valley, which reclined in a shameless slough of dune sand that would sink in two seconds in a big quake, to a shared two-bedroom flat on the solid rock of Telegraph Hill. And although she gained confidence as her career progressed and her sense of identity grew stronger, she never could shake the knee-jerk every time the Calaveras kicked its heels or the San Andreas sighed. She was more sensitive than most to seismic phenomena, she concluded. Oh, great. She had a job she loved and would probably never willingly leave, perched high in the middle of downtown San Francisco.

Holed up in her coat closet now, Danni swallowed a moan, pressed the back of her hand to her mouth. Come *on*, woman. She would stand right up and march right out, back into her office. She'd be damned if Jack and Eddie would come chick-chick-chicking after her again. She would. She would get hold of herself, just as soon as the long, rolling shudder stopped.

But it didn't stop.

The shudder became a sharp, vigorous shaking. The empty coat hangers swung and banged against each other with a dull metallic sound

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like rain on a roof. The images of doom from her dreams leaped before her. "Stop it!" Danni muttered to her imagination. "God *damn*."

But what happened next was not her imagination.

Huge booming rose up from inside the building. Through the wall itself she could hear the thud of heavy objects being tossed about, and screaming, panicked screaming, and the smashing of glass. Then the whole closet pitched back and forth, the walls tipping at thirty-five degree angles, flinging Danni with bruising viciousness. She clutched at a thick alpaca shawl hanging above her, pulled it down around her, seized the rain coat next to it, and pulled that down too, until she had something of a buffer.

Then, incredibly, the floor began to drop beneath her, in short, choppy drops at first, then accelerating, like an elevator going down and down, out of control, into a bottomless pit. Danni threw off the coats, scrambled on top of them, hung on to the clothes pole, got her tongue out of the way of her teeth. When the crashing, bone-crushing bottom finally came, a beam in the floor of the closet popped out of the carpet. Danni lost her grip, allowed her limbs to go loose, slammed flat into the mound of clothing.

She could hear the eerie rise and fall of the emergency warning siren wailing. Somewhere beyond the wall someone was yelling, roaring hysterically. There was a piercing shriek, too, that Danni finally recognized as her own, and it seemed as though the whole city cried out from one throat.

Later, Danni could recall only flashes of how she got out of Embarcadero Three. How she slammed her shoulder against the door to the coat closet and, for a drowning moment, the door wouldn't give. The deafening clang of the fire alarms, people shouting, "This way! This way!" She remembered the fire exit, the nightmarish, endless, bare metal stairs, around and down, around and down. She came out at last onto a floor that had suite numbers prefaced by sixteen. Later, in the anxiety dreams, she would see sixteen over and over. Then there was an office that looked uncannily like her own, except that everything was slightly off. The carpet was a different color. The splintered, overturned desks and cabinets were teak, not oak. The scattered PC's were IBM, not Wang.

And the view. The view was so strange that Danni remembered averting her eyes, unwilling to look.

Each step took her total concentration. She remembered lifting her knee over the window sill and seeing black and blue skin through her torn stocking, wondering quite matter-of-factly when she would start to feel the bruises. An aluminum fire ladder had been positioned against the exterior window ledge, and, trench coat arms tied around her neck,

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purse and first aid kit clutched in her hands, she climbed down a precipitous angle onto what was left of Sacramento Street. No one helped her when she stumbled down onto a block of broken concrete. They'd already gone on.

Electrical wires lay sparking everywhere. A light rain had started to fall. The Union Bank Building across the street was on fire. Broken glass gleamed on the street. At the base of highrises tilting at impossible angles were mountains of plate glass ten feet high. There was a sharp metallic smell; an incongruous beach-like odor of fresh wet sand; a sweet, sickly stench. Danni saw the bright pools of red before she placed the stench and almost retched when she realized it was blood.

People were running, falling, wailing. A harried policewoman shouted garbled directions through an electronic megaphone. Firemen marched grimly in groups of three or four, like caution lights in their bright yellow slickers. A middle-aged man in a rumpled suit sprinted by, clutching his hair, wildly darting through the debris. An old Chinese woman, still hauling a plastic bag full of cans, cackled and spit. Everywhere, wide terrified eyes, open mouths, faces constricted and twisted with terror.

But no faces Danni knew.

Then she saw him.

He stood in the crushed doorway of the discount bookstore. A halo of straw-colored curls and a handlebar mustache over a jutting chin. Creases at the corners of his pale eyes, the blue reflecting his crisp denim jacket and jeans. An Anglo face of well-tended, indeterminate middle-age. Authoritative, groomed hands, the right one sporting a chunky silver and turquoise pinky ring. Frye boots made his trim six feet even taller. In the stormy seas of Perry's or The Holding Company, he would have been a beacon, a lighthouse to which friendless women at such bars would have steered like distressed ships.

Danni normally avoided men like him. She didn't like the way they usually wielded their power, instead chose fellows with whom she felt on safe ground. She was about to resist the undeniable pull of him when she realized the futility of her normal reaction. The world wasn't normal any more. And he was the only person she could see who was standing calmly in the midst of this awful confusion, glancing about himself with cool, appraising eyes. So she drifted, dazed, across the broken pavement, her city shattered all around her, and allowed herself to be swept to him.

He took her elbow and drew her out of the swirl of people. His flashing, even smile was tinged with pain, and she saw at once why he stood so still. Not solely from extraordinary courage or nerves of steel. On the left knee of his jeans showed the scuffs of some terrible impact, dark

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stains that were probably his blood. A thirty-pound backpack lay at his feet.

"G'day, love," he said with strained cheerfulness. "Saw you coming across the street, and I said to myself, there's my girl. What a time to pick to fall in love, eh?"

She stared at him, dumbfounded.

"Bad joke? Okay, forget it. Look, I'm in a jam. Damn beam clipped me in the knee. Could you lend me a hand? The pack is heavy, I know, but you look like the athletic type."

She took in the expensive camera slung around his neck, a chrome Cross pen tucked into his gingham shirt pocket. The backpack, a professionally outfitted canvas and leather thing with all sorts of pockets and straps. On his left wrist he wore a three-inch wide, metal mesh band with three tiny screens and an elaborate miniature control panel. Danni had seen such a device only in ads; a ten-thousand dollar Infomatic by Panasony, with computer, radio, TV, and CB transmission built in next to the timepiece.

"You a journalist?"

"A journalist?" He flashed that smile at her again, but the icy eyes betrayed a flicker of surprise, as though Danni had her wits about her more than he had expected her to. "Yeah, that's right, love. A journalist. Yeah, a journalist."

"Who do you work for?" she said, somehow challenged by his look.

"Work for?"

"You know, UPI? The *Chronicle*? Free-lance?"

"Free-lance, love. Oh, sure. Free-lance is the only way to go." He pronounced "way" with a long i.

"You're Australian," declared Danni, placing the somewhat exotic accent of this lighthouse for lost women. "Good God! Have you been in San Francisco a while? Did you just get into town?"

"Just got into town, yeah. Great timing, eh? Man, would you look at *that*?" He raised the camera, was snapping photos of the devastation behind her.

In the first blind panic to leave Embarcadero Three, Danni had not wanted to look. Now she turned and looked and saw.

The highrises of the Embarcadero Center listed southward about twenty degrees off the vertical, and they had sunk into the ground up to the fifteenth story. All around them, the pavement was sheared away. Raw sand and glass and debris formed a twenty-foot no-man's land surrounding each building.

"Man, that's liquefaction in the meizoseismal zone for you, love. This dune sand and bay mud you've all been sitting on? When you get intense S waves, Loves, or Rayleighs, the soil behaves like a dense fluid instead

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of a wet solid mass." He capped the camera lens. "The foundation has probably finally hit rigid basement rock, but, Jesus, it's hard to say. Might sink some more if we get a big aftershock. And those P waves; man, what a sound."

"But what about the shops?" Danni cried. "The walkways and the restaurants, the offices? What about all those people? Oh God! Oh oh oh!" The grief and the shock and the outrage she hadn't allowed before exploded now.

He took her by the shoulders, shook her.

"Hey! Hey! You're alive, you're not hurt, you're okay."

"God, how could they let this happen? How? How?"

He gave her a peculiar look. "Don't fall apart on me, love. Listen. This was bound to happen, sooner or later. Everybody in San Francisco knew that."

"But . . . not now. Not . . . so soon."

"Man, you've had horizontal fault slip on the San Andreas of half an inch a year. Eighth of an inch a year on the Hayward. You were bound to get an episodic fault slip. It's been over a hundred years since the last big quake."

"No! No!"

"It's *happened,* love."

"What am I going to do? What am I going to do?"

"You're going to deal with it. You *have* to deal with it. Damn it, don't fall apart on me, love. Listen. The bridges are down. The BART is out. Do you have to get across the bay for any reason?"

"No. No."

"Where do you live?"

"Here; Telegraph Hill. Just . . . up . . . the hill from here."

"Oh, hell. Telegraph Hill is fine. They got their shit kicked around a bit, but they're fine up there."

"How do you know?"

He flashed the Infomatic at her, held a tiny mesh dot on the band up to her ear. A voice squeaked. "Radio says so. Besides, take my word. Damage from a quake like this is directly proportional to the type of foundation you're sitting on. Down here in the financial district, like I say, you're on alluvium, fill, mud. Jesus. But Telegraph Hill, Russian Hill, Pacific Heights? They're sitting on Franciscan assemblage: conglomerate of sandstone, shale, chert, metamorphic and ancient volcanic rock. Rock, love. Listen. You got dependents? Kids somewhere? Elderly relatives? Dog or a cat?"

"No, nothing like that. A roommate. She works at the Civic Center. Have you heard? Is it this bad there?"

"Yeah. Pretty bad at the Civic Center. All that masonry."

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"God. I don't suppose there's any way I can try to contact . . . "

"No."

"God. God." She felt stalled, unable to move. He took both her shoulders again, traced her collarbone, massaged her neck. She leaned against him, resting, but after too short a moment he pushed her back.

"Okay, then? Listen. We've got to get away from this place. There are always swarms of aftershocks after a big quake. The ground could go again. Not to mention most of these structures are unstable. Lady cop over there says to proceed to Justin Herman Plaza. You know where that is? Great. Man, let's get out of here. Think you can handle this pack for me? It's everything I have, I really can't ditch it. Give me your purse. What's this? Ah, first aid, that'll come in handy. Give me your coat. Can I lean on your shoulder? All right, steady. Ow, this damn knee. Let's go. Let's go."

So Danni took up the man's burden as though it were her own, not knowing what it contained or what he was really doing in the middle of the worst disaster San Francisco had ever witnessed.

The radio said the quake had been eight point nine on the Richter scale, but this assessment of magnitude was only preliminary because seismologists had never recorded such an enormous seismic event. It was literally off the scale. The problem was compounded because there appeared to be more than one epicenter. Massive ruptures had occurred not only in the awesome San Andreas, but the active Hayward and the restless Calaveras. The Pilarcitos Fault beneath Big Sur showed seismic activity, as well as a concealed fault beneath the city of San Francisco the existence of which had been only speculative before.

The mayor of San Francisco was flying in from Beijing, where she'd been for the past month attending a trade convention.

It took Danni and her man hours to get to Justin Herman Plaza, though under normal circumstances the curving concrete picnic ground for city workers was less than half a block away from Embarcadero Three. There a huge encampment had already begun to form around the international-style juts and planes of Vaillancourt Fountain. A pair of ambulances parked in the bus turnaround at the end of Market Street. A handful of medics roamed the crowd.

The Hyatt Regency Hotel and Embarcadero Four had sunk due to liquefaction. Whole highrises tilted toward the plaza. But there appeared to be no danger of falling concrete or glass; everything that could have fallen already had.

His name was Stuart, and he'd graduated from the University of Sydney. He'd just arrived in San Francisco to do an assignment, what exactly he couldn't say, whatever captured his fancy. He helped Danni slide the

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backpack off. They set their things down at the edge of Vaillancourt Fountain. She helped him sit and held the bandages, the scissors, the bottle of isopropyl alcohol, which was all the first aid kit held in the way of disinfectant, while he attended his knee himself. The superficial abrasion was nothing compared to the damage inside, but there was little more they could do presently than make him a bit more comfortable.

He threw her trench coat lengthwise over his head, bade her sit beneath it next to him. "Come on, keep me warm," he said. She sat. He put his arms around her, and they huddled under the tiny tent while a drizzle fell. The afternoon sun was a dirty white disk through the thin wet clouds.

The searing edge of the first shock was over. Danni felt stronger, much stronger. The throbbing of her bruises was actually welcome. The sense of being grounded in her body was far preferable to the numb unreality that had gripped her earlier. Stuart's arms and his conversation were soothing. Danni was grateful. A needle of arousal had even begun to pierce her. She had to laugh at herself for that. She couldn't be *so* badly shaken if the rain-soaked embrace of a stranger could make her feel twitchy.

But something about him bothered her.

"Your knowledge of earthquakes is impressive," she said.

"Thanks." He stroked her bruised knee.

"I mean, for a journalist."

"Journalists have to know about a lot of different things." He slipped a finger beneath her torn stocking.

"Right. But I'm a technical editor, and I've lived here ten years. I know a few things about dune sand and the rock below the hills, but *I* don't know the detailed geologic layout of the Bay area."

"I pick up things fast."

"I bet you do. Come *on*. How do you know so much?"

"Oh, hell." He sighed, withdrew the finger. "You know, you should be a journalist, too, Danni, with all these fool questions. You're going to give your husband grief someday."

"Husband. Ha! I don't think so."

"Oh, no. Not into women?"

"No!" She laughed. "I love men."

"Ah-ha." His hand slid up over her knee.

She pushed him down. "I just don't intend to marry. With two point one men for each woman in my peer group, why should any modern woman feel compelled to do so? I may or may not have children, and I like my privacy. I like being single."

"Aren't you lonely?"

"No. I've got my work. Hobbies. Acquaintances. Family back East."

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"What about love?"

"I've got five avowed friends. Two are women. Three are men, with conjugal clauses." She stared at him defiantly.

"What the bloody hell are you talking about?"

"Avowed friends. It's the new thing in the city. With people we truly love, feel like family toward, we take the vow of friendship."

"You take vows?"

"Right. It works. Six million people come and go from the city every day. Seventy percent of people in my peer group come from divorced families. Before they're forty, most people change residences an average of fifteen times, change jobs, even careers, an average of ten times. Forming lasting relationships is hard, discouraging. So when we find someone we want to take vows with, we assume obligations to maintain friendship, no matter what happens or where our avowed friend goes."

"Well, that's all very nice," said Stuart. "But what about this conjugal business?"

She didn't like his sneer. "When it feels right, we agree to have sexual relations. There are rules of responsible behavior. We can agree to exclusivity, or limited exclusivity. Financial comingling is possible, although no more so than with any other avowed friend. In fact, my avowed friend Christa and I are going to buy a house together, just as soon as we can each scrape up one-half of the down payment. She is so good with money."

"Oh, I see. I get it now." He grinned. "So the first conjugal gives good backrubs. The second gives good gifts. And the third, he gives . . . "

Danni cut him off. "My God, my God, what's that?"

She heard the rush of water before she saw the fifteen-foot wall of wave come crashing around the Ferry Building. Screams rose from the refugees camped in the plaza.

"Tsunami!" yelled Stuart, awkwardly scrambling to his feet. He grabbed her purse and trench coat, but the first aid kit still lay open, contents scattered. "Forget about that. Get the pack, quick! Up there!"

Danni slung his backpack over her arm, climbed up and up, onto one of the viewing platforms in Vaillancourt Fountain.

They watched as the wave slammed furiously onto the Embarcadero highway, coursed across the collapsed freeway ramp. Ravaging four lanes, tossing abandoned cars like a child's toys, the wave spent itself at the lip of the plaza. Then another wave came, gained ground, claimed someone's camp, before it ebbed back onto the highway, discarding an overturned silver BMW like an abalone shell.

"What is it?" cried Danni. "What did you call it?"

"Tsunami," said Stuart. "Seismic sea wave." In the dimming light he peered at the tiny TV on his wrist. "Goddamn it, Danni. The news broad-

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cast a warning for Bodega Bay and Monterey. Stinson Beach is gone. But I thought we'd be okay here. Shit!"

From a pocket in the backpack he took out a small spiral notepad he'd been scribbling in from time to time, and made a note.

A twenty-foot vertical wall of water rose up from the bay, claimed more of the pandemonium on the plaza.

"The sudden offset of a major fault under the ocean moves the water like a giant paddle," he said, clapping the notepad shut and packing it away. "Coastal areas usually get hit worst. But the mouth of a bay may amplify the waves. Man, even with the San Andreas offshore at certain spots, you've never gotten major tsunamis in California. Not like *this*."

"Oh, Stuart." Danni fought back her rising panic. "We've never had a quake like this. Please. Please hold me."

With the crash of the waves in their ears, they lay down on the grimy platform in the middle of Vaillancourt Fountain's massive planes and angles. He covered them both with her trench coat, then covered her with his heat. And when the ecstacy washed over and shook her, she found herself crying out in a harsh, urgent voice, "Don't leave me. Don't leave me. Don't leave me."

Night fell, and a clammy fog drifted in from the sea. They sandbagged the eastern periphery of Justin Herman Plaza, cleared up some of the debris, brought blankets. A decimated lunch place at the foot of the fallen hotel distributed bottles of warm Calistoga, tiny wedges of soggy pita bread with goat cheese, chunks of chocolate-filled croissants. "High tea," Stuart joked. A couple of feeble spotlights run by generator cast beams of light across the encampment, creating eerie bands of brightness and shadow.

They brought more people out of the Embarcadero Center. Some of the refugees walked or hobbled on a companion's arm. Many more were strapped to stretchers. The rescue teams set a number of stretchers down around the fountain.

From their perch, Danni watched the terrible exodus. The horror hit her anew with every shell-shocked group. She wondered about her roommate, their apartment. She anguished over Christa and Jain, Philip, Brad, and Max. She tried to think of herself as fortunate. She tried to rest.

Her body had absorbed Stuart's lovemaking like nourishment. But with her sense of renewed physical strength came a vague, uneasy feeling about the calmness that had once attracted her to him. San Francisco wasn't *his* city, after all. He hadn't climbed California Street after work for drinks at the Mark. Or taken the Sausalito Ferry or supped on luscious

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seafood beside a spectacular bay view. He watched the devastation coolly, taking notes. He was an outsider, an observer. A stranger.

A gaggle of women gathered below them. Glossy secretary-types, with still-precise hairdos and manicures, the sort of come-hither business clothes professional women like Danni tried to stay away from. Rumpled looked all right on them. An argument arose, some sort of hassle. A high-cheeked young woman in a severely tailored suit became loudly hysterical. She kept tossing a mane of sable hair. Her bright green eyes searched the crowd and the shadows. She kept resting on Stuart, who leaned against the guard rail, watching.

All furrowed concern, he knelt next to where Danni reclined. "Some kind of trouble down there, love. I'll go see if I can help. Be back in a tick. You rest. Stay with our things."

She lay back, let him kiss her eyes closed. But when he clattered down the stairs she sat up. The set of his shoulders as he hobbled onto the plaza did not say we or us or ours. The sable girl reached up to him as though mesmerized. He put his arms around her, and, huddled together, they slipped into the darkness. Out of Danni's earshot, of course, but she heard the words anyway. "There's my girl. What a time to pick to fall in love, eh?" The sable had not noticed Danni. Women that needy never do see the other woman next to the man.

Danni restrained herself from throwing his fancy backpack into the fountain waters, tried to analyze the sting. She'd set herself up for this, of course, with her big mouth about her own lovelife. He didn't understand. Still, his casual abandonment like this, under these circumstances, was unforgivable. She was quite sure Philip, who was very handsome in his own way, would never have run off to couple with some passing beauty right in front of her face. She knew Brad would not hustle out of her bed to see someone else on the same night. And Max, as crazy as he was, never made her feel like so much dirty laundry.

But this cocksure Stuart. He violated a basic standard of decency that would have been required under the vows. In the midst of chaos, he exploited vulnerability.

No. He could never be an avowed friend.

"Pardon me, miss," called a booming baritone. "Yes, you up there, with the curly black hair. Come down here, would you?"

The man in the stretcher at the foot of the fountain was in his middle sixties or so, with grizzled jowls to match the voice. The graying light-brown hair, what was left of it, was normally combed over his balding pate from a part even with the top of his left ear, but the thin wisps now straggled over his sweaty forehead. The man was greatly displeased at this indignity. His fleshy, lightly tanned face, showing years of rich

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dining and constant worry, was drawn with pain, but his pale grayish eyes snapped with outrage. His expensive three-piece suit was badly rumpled beneath a mound of soiled blankets thrown over him. In a neatly groomed, smallish hand bearing a plain gold wedding band, he held a folded-up twenty-dollar bill. Imperious, frowning, he waved the bill at Danni.

He was the sort of pompous old fart she avoided whenever possible. But, despite his attempt at an authoritative air, he looked so pathetic in the stretcher that she gathered up her purse and trench coat, left Stuart's stupid backpack behind, and went to his side.

"Look here, miss," he said when she knelt. "I am Arthur D. Mellincamp the Third."

"Bully for you," she said. "I'm Danni E. Roberts, the one and only."

He cleared his throat. She smiled at him to let him know she didn't hold anything against him. He persisted. "Miss. You have heard of Jamison & Mellincamp. The law firm." He announced all this in capital letters.

In fact, she had. Beaucoup bucks. Political connections. One of the present U.S. Supreme Court justices had once been a junior partner. Jamison & Mellincamp occupied ten floors of Embarcadero Three. At least, they used to.

"Well, *I* am Arthur D. Mellincamp the Third."

"You said that, Arthur."

"Look here, Ms. Roberts," he said, getting annoyed. She was surprised he'd actually caught her name. "I will give you this twenty-dollar bill if you will do me a small favor."

"What's that?"

"My feet are very cold, Ms. Roberts. Oh, I know these fellows are *very* busy here, but they did a *very* bad job of wrapping me, and I've got a *very* bad case of bursitis in the knees. Would you be so kind?" He proffered the bill.

She waved the money away, went to the foot of his stretcher. The rescue team had indeed quite sloppily wrapped a couple of gray blankets over and under him.

"Do hurry, Ms. Roberts," he said crossly. "I'm *very* cold."

Danni unwrapped several blankets before she got to the blood-soaked sheets. The stench almost made her pass out. She quickly rewrapped his crushed abdomen, straightened the dressing over the stumps left of his legs. She didn't want to touch the hasty tourniquets, but knew enough to rewrap the blankets around and under the stretcher, so that his head and torso were slanting down.

He couldn't help but see her face, the tears. He dropped the twenty-dollar bill. What little color had been in the sallow cheeks completely

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drained away. But then he expelled a laugh. "Now, now, Ms. Roberts," he boomed, as though needing to comfort her. "They do wonderful things with prosthetics these days. Besides, I'm better off without 'em. Gave me hell with the damn bursitis."

But he clamped his lips tightly. The jowls began to quiver. He squeezed his eyes shut.

Danni retrieved the bill, tucked it into his breast pocket, patted his shoulder. "Arthur," she said loudly into his ear. "Watch my things."

Breathless, mouth dry, she darted through the groaning crowd to where the ambulances had parked at the end of Market Street. An unruly mob of people had gathered there, hands outstretched, voices strident. The medics were fending them off. Danni shouldered her way through, seized the arm of a harassed-looking black fellow in a lime-green uniform and cap.

"I've got a seriously injured guy over there," she told him.

"I don't doubt it, lady," said the medic. His dark eyes were painfully bloodshot.

"Hey, I mean this guy's *legs* are gone. And I don't know *how* bad his guts are."

"Yeah. I appreciate that. We'll get him to a hospital. We really will. But not until morning, lady."

"I don't know if he can make it until morning," Danni said. "He's lost a lot of blood."

"Lady, I'm sorry. I really am."

"Jesus." Danni blew the air out of her lungs, frustrated. "Can't you at least come look? Can't you give him something?"

The medic scrutinized her face. "Okay. But don't say nothing to nobody."

She extracted herself from the jostling crowd and waited. Minutes later, the medic came, empty-handed. She looked at him questioningly. He flashed the edge of his lime-green jacket, where he'd stashed some supplies inside.

"Yes, I see you there, you young thugs," said the booming voice as they approached. "I am Arthur D. Mellincamp the Third. Come any closer, and I shall have you arrested, forthwith."

A pair of scrawny Chinese punks in blue facepaint and platinum afros were circling him, hungrily eyeing Danni's purse and trench coat next to the stretcher. Arthur was feebly batting at them with the belt to the coat. At the sight of Danni and the strapping medic, they scattered like leaves.

Without ceremony or introduction, the medic knelt, bared Arthur's forearm, tore open a packet, expertly popped in an IV and bound it, clipped the tube, handed a tiny pint of saline solution to Danni to hold.

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He flipped the blankets up, grunted, flipped them down again. He gave Arthur a morphine injection, gave Danni two small bottles, the larger with a pint of fresh water, the smaller full of acetaminophen with codeine.

"Antibiotic with pain-killer," said the medic to Danni, indicating the latter bottle. "It's not much, but that's all I got. Give him two tablets every hour, if you can. When the IV solution is gone, slide the needle out, careful as you can. Try to keep it clean." To Arthur he said, "We'll get you out of here, sir. Just as soon as possible."

"How soon is soon?" demanded Arthur. "How soon is possible?"

But the medic stood and strode away. "Thank you," Danni called after him. The blue-faced punks began to circle again. "I see you there, you young thugs," Arthur called out in his best boom. Danni set the saline solution down. "Aaarrr!" she yelled, and charged at them, flapping her arms. They ran off at last. She wrapped her trench coat around her shoulders, shivered, sat down next to Arthur, held the bottle up once more.

"Good work, Ms. Roberts," he said.

"You're not too shabby yourself, Arthur," she replied.

He passed out.

So as the stars shone through rolling patches of fog, she sat with the grandson of the eminent Arthur D. Mellincamp and held up a bottle of salt water while his life seeped away into the sticky sheets. When the injection wore off, and pain kicked him out of unconsciousness, she fed him two tablets of codeine. With her fingertips, she brushed the straggling wisps of hair back over his head and crept close to him, sharing her body heat.

"Ms. Roberts," he said, the voice thick and strained, but still decibels above the average person despite his condition. His eyes were misty with the drugs and the pain that couldn't be totally masked. He peered at her. "Did anyone ever tell you you've got beautiful eyes?"

"Every day, Arthur. Shush, now."

"No, really. Everyone in my family. Mother, father, siblings. First wife, second wife. Daughter, two sons. Even old Ming, my Siamese cat, Ms. Roberts. And me, of course. We all of us have got blue eyes."

"Your eyes look kind of gray to me, Arthur."

"Oh, no. Gray? No, no, they're quite blue. Well, they used to be bluer, Ms. Roberts. But you." He got dreamy. "Looking into brown, brown eyes like yours. It's like looking into another world. Strange and beautiful. Do you mind me telling you that, Ms. Roberts?"

He was as pale as a corpse.

"I don't mind, Arthur. But you really must try to be quiet, and rest."

"No, let me talk. It takes my mind off everything. You're very sweet, Ms. Roberts. So young. So innocent."

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She laughed. "I'm not sweet or young *or* innocent, Arthur."

"Yes! Yes, you are. Not a day over twenty-nine."

"Give or take five or six years."

"Bosh. When you get to be my age, you're all spring chickens."

Danni suddenly thought of Jack and Eddie, their clucking after her, and their chick-chick-chicking. Dear God, she'd been right. She'd been right to run and hide. Unexpected tears filled her eyes. She hadn't seen Jack or Eddie anywhere. She hadn't seen anyone she knew from the Embarcadero Center, anywhere.

Arthur reached up and touched the wetness on her cheek. His fingers trembled. "Ms. Roberts, I'd like to leave you something. In consideration of the kindness you've shown me this night."

"Don't be silly, Arthur." She sniffed and wiped her face on the sleeve of her coat.

"I'm not being silly. I'm a millionaire."

"But it's not necessary!"

"But I want to, Ms. Roberts. Humor a dying man."

"You're not dying, Arthur. I won't let you die."

"Please, Ms. Roberts. Please get paper and something to write with. Do it for me."

She dug through her purse. A ballpoint was there, but she'd left her address book on her desk that morning, hadn't taken her checkbook. She usually carried a small spiral notebook, but couldn't find it now. Damn! Paper, paper. Where could she get some paper?

Stuart's fancy-shmancy backpack, of course. Mr. Journalist. She distinctly recalled him stashing his notepad in one of the side pockets. She scampered back up the Vaillancourt Fountain. Sure enough, the pack was still there, where he'd stowed it in a corner of the guard rail. Though others had set up camp in the fountain, no punks or looters had found the pack yet.

Her curiosity was piqued. What kind of journalist was he, anyway? Did his brilliance match his looks? Did his literary talent match his lovemaking talent? Did any poetry live in the likes of him?

That was when she discovered her revenge was spurious. She had placed his precious possessions in no jeopardy at all when she abandoned her vigil. The backpack was neatly chained and locked to the guard rail, like a bicycle. The finely knit chain ran discreetly through thick leather piping that entirely girded the pack. She also saw for the first time that the slide to the zipper on the main body of the pack was threaded with a custom-fit steel lock.

She didn't know whether she was more shocked at his security system or that he had known all along how dispensable she was.

The side pockets were completely accessible, however, and she tore

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through them, searching for the notepad. One pocket held a Three Musketeers bar, another a small mirror. Yet another held a pack of Marlboros, cellophane wrapper intact. Funny; she hadn't noticed the stink of tobacco on his breath or hands or clothes, and she knew from Max how hard that smell was to eradicate even when the smoker was abstaining. Inexplicably, the image of a soldier sprang to her mind; a soldier carrying cigarettes and chocolate and shiny baubles to bribe the natives. A mercenary.

She took the Marlboros, the mirror, and the Three Musketeers.

At last she found the notepad, navy blue cardboard covers with an emblem of some sort that seemed vaguely familiar: a gold sunburst inside of a silver square. She flipped through the pages from back to front. Plenty of clean blanks for Arthur.

Her nerves twanged. She turned to Stuart's notes.

There were no words. No words at all. A lot of numbers: 09:16 and 13:35 and 16:40. Also 8.9+ and 3.2 and 2.5. And notations after the numbers: PKIKP and SSV and PPS, SKSP.

She took his notepad also. Tough luck, love.

She scrambled back down to Arthur. His eyes were closed. He was shivering badly. When she touched his shoulder, he started and his eyes flipped open.

"Ms. Roberts? Is everything all right? Did you find anything?" Under the circumstances, his presence of mind was astonishing.

"Yes, Arthur. I found something." She lay down on the hard ridge of the stretcher, half embracing him. His shivering eased. She fed him a bit of the Three Musketeers, broke open the Marlboros, lit one, held it to his lips.

He took a deep drag. "I quit smoking," he said, and smiled.

Danni took a drag herself. "Me, too."

He wanted to give her one hundred thousand dollars in cash. When she protested, he raised it to one hundred and fifty. Put a down on a condo, he told her. Then he wrote the codicil himself. The Probate Code required the document to be in his own handwriting. He insisted she get up and go find three witnesses. The holographic codicil might not stand up in court if his second wife decided to get difficult and challenge his testamentary capacity. Danni persuaded three Japanese waiters who camped nearby. Arthur made the waiters put down their social security numbers next to their signatures.

"Arthur. Since we've got three witnesses here," Danni said, unexpectedly shy. "Would you like to take the vow of friendship with me? I feel that you're worthy of it."

A little color bloomed in his sunken cheeks. "Don't think I'm a prig,

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Ms. Roberts," he said. "But I've already had two wives, and this is a new-fangled thing. What's involved?"

She laughed. "No financial commitment. No sex, unless we both agree to terms. Just . . . lasting friendship. Rules of responsible behavior, Arthur. That we freely pledge to."

He winked. "Let's do it. Can we do it?"

"Well, there's normally a vowspeaker. I wouldn't even think of taking the vows on such short notice, under normal circumstances."

"But these are not normal circumstances, Ms. Roberts."

"Exactly. So I can lead the vows, if our witnesses will witness."

The Japanese waiters giggled, turned shy, but stayed.

She and Arthur joined hands.

"Repeat after me," said Danni.

"I, Arthur D. Mellincamp the Third;

"Do join with Danni E. Roberts,

"As friend and friend;

"To pledge my loyalty,

"My honesty,

"My generosity,

"My compassion, and affection;

"Till death do us part."

She gave him two more codeine tablets, and he began to babble. "Take this down, Ms. Roberts," he ordered. He wanted to tell his first wife he was sorry. He wanted to tell his partner Helen L. Jamison, granddaughter of the eminent Matthew C. Jamison, that he despised her and the way she practiced law. He wanted his daughter to know that if she really wasn't happy at Stanford Law School, she could drop out and he would not cut her off, although he sincerely hoped she'd give it the old Mellincamp try. And the second wife should be sure to give the Siamese cat, Ming, his bran. Older cats need fiber, he told Danni. He started to cry when he told her how, of all his family, only old Ming came to the door to greet him, like a dog every night for seventeen years, and what a magnificent cat Ming was.

Then suddenly he snapped to. "Good Lord, Ms. Roberts," he said. "How is Stanford? Have you heard any news?"

Stuart's Infomatic had given plenty of news. Danni gulped, shifted her eyes away.

"Don't spare me the truth, Ms. Roberts. You're my avowed friend now."

"Pretty bad, Arthur. Stanford sits right on top of the San Andreas Fault, you know."

"I see. And my house. How is Piedmont?"

"Piedmont sits right on top of the Hayward Fault, Arthur. I heard there was fault displacement of fifteen feet up in the hills."

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"Fault displacement?"

"A crevice opened up."

"I see." He digested this information, and she could see his mind snapping, snapping. "Lord, I wonder how the Widdell house fared. Wes Widdell lives right down the block from me."

"Widdell. You mean as in Widdell Corporation?"

"Precisely, Ms. Roberts."

"Wow."

"Know the name?"

"Who doesn't. They're multibillionaires, right? Construction? Widdell Corporation built the Hunter's Point Bridge. Alcatraz Casino. SOMA Stadium. The Marin BART."

"That's right, Ms. Roberts. Not to mention much of what one sees in the financial district."

"Used to see," Danni said gloomily.

"Yes. Well. Widdell Corporation is one of Jamison & Mellincamp's biggest clients. Has been for eighty years. Oh, Wes Widdell isn't as close to me as his father once was with mine. We've had our differences. For one thing, I don't like the way Wes does business."

"So I wonder how old Wes is doing tonight," said Danni.

"I'm sure he's fine," said Arthur. "Actually, he and his family aren't even in town. Been down in Barbados for the past month."

"The mayor was out of town, too, for the past month. Lucky them, right? You don't suppose," she joked, "they know something we don't know?"

That's when Arthur's outrage let loose. His jaw dropped. His eyes blazed anew. He almost sat up in his agitation.

Danni wasn't sure what she had said, had to restrain him. "You'll make yourself bleed," she pleaded.

"Good Lord! The—the bastard!" He sputtered. "Confidential, he said. Confidential! And he didn't even have the decency to warn me and *my* family. *Me*! Arthur D. Mellincamp the Third. After all these years."

"What *are* you talking about, Arthur?"

"What am I talking about. Indeed. And what about everyone else." He clamped his lips shut and slumped back. "Confidential," he muttered.

"Okay, it's confidential," said Danni. "Shush now."

"No, I will not shush, Ms. Roberts." His jaw set with determination. That frowning, imperious look that had probably made his subordinates cringe returned. "Take this down. Union Bank, Sacramento Street. Safe deposit box number 12235. You'll have to get there and get it before Helen Jamison does, if it even still exists."

"Get what, Arthur?"

"My personal copy of the contract between Widdell Corporation and

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the mayor of San Francisco. Oh, Wes demanded that no copies be retained in our files. The mayor was to take extraordinary precautions as well. And of course Widdell Corporation is privately owned, so Wes had no one else he couldn't control to answer to. But Ms. Roberts." The gray eyes snapped. "*I* don't practice law that way. I keep records. Of everything."

Through her special executive powers, the mayor of San Francisco had granted to Widdell Corporation a license to bore into municipal subsoil and place a device in the deep concealed fault beneath the city. Placement of the device may have worked a miracle. But maybe not. The risks were high. There was an exculpation clause, relieving Widdell Corporation from any and all liability should the device fail to perform as described. There was also a right of first refusal reserved to Widdell Corporation regarding an extensive list of infrastructure projects that might or might not be offered by the City of San Francisco. And the entire transaction, although consummated under executive municipal jurisdiction, was to be stricken from all public administrative records, so that no one, not even under freedom of information powers, could ever discover it.

The device was variously referred to as a tectonic stress management device, or a plate implant. Arthur chose to call it an anti-earthquake machine.

Three things happened before a fiery sun rose out of the shattered eastern hills to mock the morning:

At 4:45 a.m., an aftershock measuring five point nine on the Richter scale rumbled through San Francisco, making flocks of birds suddenly screech and twitter, setting off fire alarms and the emergency warning siren, shaking down anything still tottering, and rudely awakening five hundred thousand homeless people camping in downtown San Francisco.

At 5:18, Arthur D. Mellincamp the Third died in the arms of his avowed friend, Danni E. Roberts.

And at 6:32, Stuart came back, smelling of sex.

Danni was arranging with the medics to take Arthur's body over to the corner of Drumm and Washington Street where a makeshift morgue had been set up. The Mellincamp remains would join ten thousand other corpses.

"G'day, love," Stuart said, dripping with phony concern. He was limping badly. Physical pain filmed his eyes.

"Fuck off, Mr. Journalist," she said, wiping her face on her coat sleeve. "Or whatever you are."

"What?" His straw-colored curls glowed gold in the morning light. A haze of bronze whiskers furred the jutting chin. He was one of those

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people who look good even after a night spent humping in the rain. "I don't get it."

She extracted her elbow from his grip. "You don't get it? I'll tell you what to get. Go get your sable girl to play pack animal for you. I'm sure that's about her speed."

"What?" He studied her. "Oh, now I see. My my, the modern woman. Ms. Independence with three conjugal friends. Don't tell me you're upset that I went off for a bit."

"No. I'm not upset. Why should I be upset? I don't care what you do."

"Now listen, love . . . "

"Ms. Roberts to you, pal."

"Come on, Danni, what's the big deal?"

"Well, for one thing, I spent the night with someone else, too. The big deal is he died about an hour ago."

"I'm sorry."

"I doubt it. And for another thing, I thought . . . I thought we had some sort of . . . pact. To see this thing through. Together. I thought you might be a friend." She rubbed her mouth, self-conscious of her disheveled appearance under his steady, ice-blue gaze. "Wow. My mistake."

"No! We do! A pact, that's right." He put his arm around her shoulders. She wriggled away, but he caught her again. "Hey, I'm back, aren't I? I haven't left you. We have a pact, okay? We're friends."

"You understand nothing about friendship."

"Sure I do. Besides. It wasn't what you think. I was helping the wounded through the night myself."

"Ah yes, the wounded. I know that kind of wounded. They used to limp to The Holding Company in droves every Friday night to share their pain."

"Love, it wasn't what it seems."

"Right. Very little about you is what it seems, Stuart. For example, I don't believe that you're a journalist."

He was so slick. He said nothing, just smiled at her questioningly, waiting for her to fill in his blanks.

She waved the navy blue notepad, watched for his recognition and his anger, was pleased when they came.

The bullshitty smile drained away. His icy eyes turned colder. "Been snooping, have we, love?"

"What do you care? You left the pack behind. There are looters everywhere. Anyone could have taken this."

"Not if you were watching my things like you were supposed to. I was depending on you."

"*Supposed* to. I owe you *nothing*, pal. Besides. I never would have gone back if my friend Arthur hadn't wanted me to record his last wishes.

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Now, let's see." She held the notepad up, flipped through it. "Thirteen thirty-five. That would be thirty-five minutes after one o'clock in the afternoon, right? And three point two? Must have been an aftershock of that magnitude. Stop me if I'm wrong. And PKIKP and SSV? Well, that must be some sort of notation for types of seismic waves. I remember; you said something about P waves and S waves, Loves and Rayleighs. Bet a guy like you can tell what sort of wave it is from the ground movement. Am I warm?"

"Smart lady."

"Ph.D., Philosophy, U. of Penn. You're a seismologist, aren't you?"

For the first time, Mr. Cool seemed a little nervous.

"So what's in the backpack, Stuart?" Danni said. She had a bad habit of raising her voice when she got mad. "A bomb? A gun? How about a tectonic stress management device?"

"Take it easy," he said. A passing medic gave Danni a curious look. Stuart strongarmed her toward the fountain. "Keep your damn voice down."

She resisted, struggled. "How about a plate implant?" she fairly yelled. "Keep your hands off me, pal."

"Shut *up*," he warned. But he let go.

"Why? Why this secrecy, Stuart? What are you hiding?"

"It's confidential, man."

"Confidential, right. Arthur said that too. Arthur said a lot of things before he died. He said you probably knew this was going to happen. Didn't you? Well, didn't you?"

"Calm the fuck down, and come here."

He hustled her up into Vaillancourt Fountain, went to the backpack, unchained it, inspected it. Wearily sat down and rubbed his eyes.

"You're right, I'm a seismologist," he said. "I studied under the Haddon-Bullen chair at the University of Sydney. Did research on the Tonga-Kermadec Trench."

"So you were hired by the mayor of San Francisco?"

"Huh?" He looked up, bleary. "Yeah, sure. That's right. Hired by San Francisco. And you're also right, we knew a big quake was coming. But, Danni, we didn't know when. We couldn't possibly predict *exactly* when."

"But why didn't you warn the city?"

"How? Maybe there will be a massive earthquake within the next month, but maybe not. What would you have done?"

"I could have gotten a month's vacation time. I might have cleared out of here for a month."

"So you come back after a month and a day, and *then* the big quake hits."

"Oh."

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"And can you imagine how the business community would scream? Shut down the city? Send away the consumers? For a whole month?"

Danni thought. "I still think you should have warned us, even if it was only a possibility. Like with the tsunami. You were so busy making your scientific observations and speculations that you didn't care about the people."

He shrugged, straightened a strap on the pack, fiddled with the pockets. "This Arthur chap; he told you about the plate implant?"

"That's right."

"Who the hell was he?"

"He was the lawyer for Widdell Corporation. He drafted the contract. He told me about the mayor's involvement, the secrecy, the exculpation clause. Everything. But it failed, didn't it, Stuart? The anti-earthquake machine?"

"It failed." He sighed. "You see, the topmost mantle of the earth, the lithosphere, consists of several large plates. Plate structure undergoes constant, gradual change. At the edge of each plate, tectonic forces cause physical, even chemical, changes in the rocks. The Pacific Plate on the seaward side of the San Andreas Fault is getting smaller. And it's moving; moving slowly northwest.

"In between the plates is a gouge zone. Gouge is the crushed rock along the fault. Through constant grinding, the gouge becomes fine granular material. Percolating water inundates it, turns it into clay and silt with peculiar elastic properties. Below the gouge zone is stronger crystalline rock. This basement rock becomes strained as the plates move. When enough strain accumulates, the basement rock ruptures, and an earthquake occurs.

"Widdell Corporation has worked on numerous subterranean construction projects. They've got shafts and tunnels and bores over all the major California faults: the San Andreas, the Hayward, the Calaveras, the Pilarcitos."

"Even the fault below San Francisco," added Danni.

"Yeah," said Stuart. "Though, that was the one location where Widdell didn't already have permission to make an installation." He gave her that peculiar look of his. "Their engineers watched and measured the movement of the plates. Strain had been building for a long time. Building to dangerous levels. The engineers approached me and several other geophysicists. We got the idea of placing implants in middle levels of the gouge zone in all the major faults. The implants were designed to offset the tectonic strain between the plates, reduce the stress placed on the basement rock. Oh, locations directly on the faults would experience gradual fault slip, and slow damage from that. But nothing sudden, nothing catastrophic.

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"But it didn't work. The implants didn't absorb the strain like we all thought they would. Damn it, Danni, we didn't ever want this to happen."

"But why hide, Stuart? Why the secrets?"

"Oh hell, we couldn't *promise* we would stop the next big quake. And Widdell was worried. Bay area residents, consumer advocates, the families of victims, might try to claim that if the implants failed, Widdell should be liable. The loss of life and property must be in the billions."

"Right. Very bad for business. Not to mention the mayor's political career. Especially since no warning was issued."

"Can you blame them?"

"I don't know. Somehow it seems so irresponsible."

"Yeah, and when the good samaritan stops to help someone, and the person dies anyway, you don't jump all over the good samaritan's ass, do you. You're grateful for the effort."

"Right." That hit a little too close to home. Danni softened. "So what are you going to do now?" She nodded at the backpack.

"Well, if this bloody knee holds up long enough, I'm going to place that sucker down in the fault below Market Street. I had to wait twenty-four hours for the worst aftershocks to settle down. I guess I'll be on my way now."

"Isn't there a plate implant down there already?"

"Yeah. But obviously it isn't enough. Like with all the implants; we underestimated the earth, its immense tectonic power. There is still a lot of strain building up down there. That little fault; it hasn't popped its cork yet, love." He looked genuinely worried.

"God." Danni considered the implications. Dread rose in her throat. "Will another implant do any good?"

"Worth a try, isn't it? Will you help me?"

She didn't particularly want to help him, but she would do just about anything for her city. So for the sake of San Francisco, Danni allowed herself to be persuaded for the last time. Later she would decide that was her one major fault: giving people like the Stuarts of the world the benefit of a doubt.

"Oh, Stuart," she said, and sighed, shouldering the backpack and its contents. "Why did you have to go off like that? Why did you have to ruin everything?"

"Danni, love," he said, and even he couldn't hide his annoyance with her. "Why do you have to ask so many questions?"

The crisp azure morning made the devastation of Market Street harder to swallow. Fog and bleak rain would have been more fitting today, Danni thought. The soaring brickwork of One Market Plaza, where Widdell Corporation kept its San Francisco headquarters, lay in ruin. Chunks

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of pavement protruded here and there. Most of the fallen electrical wires had been cleared away, but fires still smoldered in shop fronts. Some windows had been boarded up against looters. The ransacked interiors of others bore sad testimony that their owners were too late.

Another morgue with seven thousand bodies had been set up on the corner of Beale Street and Market.

Stuart directed Danni to the Montgomery-Market BART station. The subway tunnels beneath the bay, and whoever had been commuting through them in the last lap of the rush hour yesterday morning, had been totally crushed. The tunnels beneath dry ground fared slightly better, however, and hard-hatted rescue crews scurried about the station.

Danni had never liked the Bay Area Rapid Transit.True, the BART stations were neat and relatively crime-free, the trains were usually prompt and swift. But BART had always struck her as sterile and oppressive. The fluorescent lights made everyone look pasty-faced. The tunnels seemed dehumanizing and claustrophobic, like an awful vision of the future created by some paranoid science fiction writer in the previous century. Going down into the Montgomery-Market station made her very uneasy indeed.

But not nearly as uneasy as Stuart made her. If he'd been ice before, he was steel now: hard with purpose, unyielding. He dodged police, flashed an ID at BART personnel, drove her further and deeper into the station.

They came to a locked and bolted door in a metal wall. He produced a key, opened the outer door, punched a code into the control panel on the interior door, pushed Danni into a dark, interior hall. At the end of the hall was an elevator shaft, another panel on the elevator door. Exterior metal doors slid open, revealing yet another set of elevator doors.

That was when Danni saw the emblem: a gold sunburst inside of a silver square. The doors were navy blue. There was a slogan: "Building the future for YOU." And the stylized name: WIDDELL CORPORATION.

She whirled to face his gun.

"That's right, love. Academic salaries just don't make it. In you go."

"No!"

"Don't make me kill you, love. I can probably get there on my own now."

"You would *kill* me? Why? Why, Stuart?"

"Got a job to do, love. Wes Widdell is demanding, but he's generous. They've paid me more money than you'll ever see in one place. Widdell expects results for that kind of money. Now, in you go. Please?"

She stepped into the elevator. On yet another control panel inside, Stuart punched in more information. The doors clanged shut. The ele-

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vator car dropped precipitously, down and down, jarring awful memories in Danni of another enclosed place, another entrapment, another plunge into the earth. She felt faint. Her ears stopped up. The air became heavy, smelled like a grave. She gagged.

After endless moments, the elevator slowed and came to a stop. Another code opened the doors.

They stepped out into a cold, thick darkness. Stuart turned a switch. A string of feeble lightbulbs revealed the bore, a high tunnel girded with arcs of steel, bare rock showing between each curved skeletal beam. The ground was raw rock and loose earth. Stuart directed her to the end of the bore, instructed her to take the backpack off.

He unlocked the pack, keeping the gun trained on her.

"That's it, Danni," he said, nodding at the scooped-out end of the bore. "The Dolores Fault."

A jagged crevice cut across the rock floor, disappearing beneath the stone walls on either side. Huge vertical cracks emanating from the fault split the walls from floor to ceiling. She could see the tectonic plate on the opposite side of the fault, disappearing beyond the periphery of the bore. The fault itself was filled with gouge so that the grinding edges of the plates were bared only three or four feet within the crevice.

Wedged on top of the gouge, Danni saw the plate implant at last.

It was a massive slab of incredibly thick steel. One end appeared to be welded to the edge of the opposite plate. The welding on the end closest to her was shorn away. This edge of the implant was nosing down into the gouge.

"Yes, love, that's the tectonic stress management device," said Stuart. His voice rang and echoed in the bore. "As you can see, it's not a machine at all. The fault, these plates of rock below our feet and all around us; that's the *real* machine. The earth. A huge natural machine, the dynamics of which we scarcely understand. Did you know that it was not until 1970 that geophysicists could even agree on how thick the asthenosphere is, or whether the E core is solid or liquid?"

He laid the contents of the backpack out. Fuses and caps and ignitors. Parts harmless in themselves but, when assembled, creating a compact, powerful bomb that would emit a band of microwaves capable of reducing everything within a ten foot radius, even solid steel, to the consistency of gouge. "Yeah, you sure are one smart lady, Danni. You were right the first time." He nodded at the plate implant. "That sucker's got to blow."

She gasped. "I don't understand!"

He laughed bitterly. "Neither did we. We didn't understand, but we went ahead and placed the implants everywhere anyway. *Everywhere.* Oh, our calculations were based on a good theory. The fault slip theory has been advocated by geophysicists for a hundred years."

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"But it's only a theory, right?" said Danni. Fear began to beat a tattoo in her chest. Breathing was painful.

"That's right. Remember I said that water-saturated gouge has peculiar elastic properties? Very peculiar properties. Extraordinary properties.

"There's another theory, the elastic rebound theory. You see, as the plates inexorably move, the gouge and the weak crustal rock it contains stretch like a rubber band. Under the elastic rebound theory, we postulate that when the basement rock ruptures due to tectonic strain, the gouge and crustal rocks will snap back. Snap back like an overwound spring, causing an earthquake.

"We knew that fault slip continually occurs. We *didn't* know that elastic rebound continually occurs too, episodically, causing adjustments in tectonic structure."

"But why must you destroy the plate implant?" Danni pleaded. Her teeth began to chatter.

"You remember I told you that the Pacific Plate is moving?" Stuart said. "Do you know where it's moving *to*? It moves to the Aleutian arc and the Bay of Alaska. There, the edge of the plate plunges into a deep oceanic trench and is pushed *under* the abutting northern plate. Do you have any notion of the enormous force that's released? When the plate is pushed down and under, huge earthquakes occur. That's why we regularly observe quakes of seven magnitude and greater off the Alaskan coast. It's called a subduction zone."

Limping painfully, he gingerly carried the bomb to the lip of the fault, gave it to her, motioned her into the crevice. He instructed her to step lightly down onto the gouge, place the bomb in the middle of the plate implant. He held up the remote control detonator. But when she started to climb out of the fault, he waved her back.

She gaped at him.

"Sorry, love. You've heard and seen too much, I'm afraid. You are the last piece of evidence, besides the plate implant, of course, that can possibly connect Widdell Corporation or me with the earthquake. An earthquake a thousand times worse than it should have been with fault slip alone. You see, when we put the implants in all the major faults, the constant elastic rebound became greater than we could have predicted. To this day, I don't know why, Danni. But the enormous power of the plates tore the welding out, started pushing the plate implants down into and under the basement rock. Damn it to hell, love, the plate implants: *they created an artificial subduction zone.*"

A deep rumbling sound rose from beneath Danni's feet. She couldn't tell if the mild shaking that commenced was the earth or her own terror.

"The other plate implants are gone, Danni," said Stuart in a flat voice.

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"In the San Andreas and the Hayward, the Calaveras and the Pilarcitos. Pushed down and under so deep no one will ever find them. This is the last one."

A booming filled the bore. The earthquake struck.

And all around her, Danni saw the great plates tremble. The rocks moved as though alive. In the walls and the ceiling she could almost *see* the huge joints and gears and pistons of the tectonic machine, propelled by a vast ancient consciousness, Gaea, whose working was so alien no human being yet understood Her.

Stuart lost his balance, lost control of his bad knee. He buckled. The gun flew out of his hand. Danni sprang out of the crevice just as the gouge began to liquefy. The massive plate implant, with the bomb on top, sank like a stone. The floor around the fault was pitching. Stuart yelled in pain, rolled, and then he fell into the fault. The gouge was sinking. The edges of the plates clapped together below his feet.

Danni tore off her trench coat, threw the hem into the crevice, braced herself on a jutting rock. Stuart seized the length of the cloth, scrambled up the crevice. He collapsed on the lip of the fault.

They both lay there, panting. The quake was over.

He stared at her in disbelief. "Why—did you save me?" he said in a strangled voice. "I was going to leave *you* there. Why didn't you let the earth take me?"

Danni blew the air out of her lungs, disgusted. "Let the earth take you. Right," she said. "That would have been justice, wouldn't it? That would have been your karma, you bastard. But Stuart. I'm only one person. I can't judge you by myself. All I can do is bring you in. Let the law judge you. Let the people of San Francisco judge you."

He shook his head. "I'll still have to kill you, love."

"I don't think so, pal." She leveled the gun at him. "I shoot skeet for sport," she lied. "They call me dead-eye Danni."

He laughed, but his lips were white. "You'll never be able to prove a thing, dead-eye Danni. Widdell Corporation is a thousand steps ahead of you. The plate implants are gone. The research is in a safe deposit box in Geneva. I won't talk, I've got alibis up the ass. There's no record."

"Yes, there is." She grinned. "I've got the contract. That's right, Stuart. Arthur D. Mellincamp the Third gave it to me." The lying got easier as she went along. "He made his own copy. I stashed it someplace where you and Widdell Corporation will never find it."

"I don't believe you," he said, but she could see he was pondering where her hiding place could possibly be.

"Don't believe me," she said. "Hey, did you know that the contract not only provides an exculpation clause, so that Widdell Corporation can

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never be held liable for any damage, but that there's a right of first refusal clause too?"

"Right of first refusal," he said warily. "What does that mean?"

"It means, Stuart, that Widdell Corporation gets first dibs on reconstructing San Francisco. It means that ultimately Widdell Corporation didn't really care whether the plate implants worked or not. It means that Widdell Corporation will make a killing from this quake. More money than you'll ever see in all the places of your whole miserable life. Did you know that, love?"

"No," he said slowly. "I didn't know that."

Then he smiled, and it was a Gioconda smile, filled with all the treachery and all the possibility for redemption human beings are capable of.

Around them the great tectonic machine sighed and grumbled, flexed its restless mantle, moved in mysterious ways. Then Gaea fell silent, awaiting oracles to speak Her meaning.* ●

* Note: Research for this story was obtained from *Earthquakes: A Primer* (1978, W. H. Freeman & Co.) and *Inside The Earth* (1982, W. H. Freeman & Co.), both by Bruce A. Bolt, Professor of Seismology and Director of Seismographic Stations at the University of California, Berkeley; "A Geologic Map of the San Francisco Bay Region, California" (Erickson Maps); and the 1987 list of predictions by the World Future Society, Bethesda, Md.

DAMAGE REPORT: DALLAS HEXAHEDRON

18:47:22—two hours after the shockwaves
rocked Soleri's support columns and the Underbelly,
which sustained severe external collapse.
Mostly total drop-offs from the West Downface,
leaving apartment mods dangling like babies' teeth
above the sprawling Tex-Kansas wastelands
on sinews of massive blue power cables.

Casualty estimates appear amazingly light.
Most of us were Topcity in the needle-factories
or trapped during tube-rail rush hours.

I've used all my channels and connections with
the rubble crews churning below,
hoping for a word about Gramps and Janey.
Apparently they *were* back from shopping Hubside.
I'll have to face that during the ground report.

—Robert Frazier

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Net Worth

Islands In the Net

By Bruce Sterling
Arbor House, $17.95

What extraordinary futures we have these days! Some of the current crop of writers seem to have a talent for the complex extrapolation of things-to-come that amounts to genius. Bruce Sterling has created such a future for his *Islands In the Net.* It's as many-faceted as that of Robert Reed's *The Hormone Jungle*, though not quite as off-the-wall. And it's almost as completely convincing as that of John Shirley's "Eclipse" books, which win the prize so far for chilling *verismo.*

It takes place just around the corner of the next century and is as intricate as . . . well . . . our own age, which makes it a wee bit difficult to encapsulate. Total nuclear disarmament has taken place. There is a sort of international police force/antiterrorist organization operating out of Vienna, where the disarmament accord was signed. America has become more and more dominated by multinational corporations, which are benignly dominating many people's lives in an almost tribal way. And even more dominant is the Net, the conglomerate sum of telephone, television, computer, and satellite communication, and every other thing we're potentially wired into today. Every civilized country is tied into the Net. Every *civilized* person has access to it, and without it, feels lost. As the mother of the leading character says, "People don't prize possessions now like we did in the premillennium . . . All their money goes into the Net. For games or business or television—things that come over the wire."

(The global "net" idea is one of those concepts which suddenly seem to appear in several places at once in SF. It's an instantaneous extrapolation which appears utterly likely, but coming up with this sort of idea takes a powerful gift for science fictional conceptualizing.)

But there are indeed "islands" in the net. Many of them are "pirate" communities— pseudo-nations which specialize in stealing, duplicating, and selling information and technology in the same way that certain third world countries today duplicate and market designer goods, records, and books. Singapore and Grenada are prime examples in Sterling's world. There are also innumerable splinter groups, political and religious, from

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holy prostitutes to Tuareg isolationists, of which many are prone to violence. And there is a constant flow of high technology, drugs, and weapons from country to country.

Against this bouillabaisse of a world order, Sterling sets a plot of some simplicity, calculated to show off the background.

Laura is happily married, has a child, and runs a lodge for a multinational which houses corporate guests. When the corporation decides to try and deal with several of the pirate nations, the representatives are housed in Laura's establishment. One of them, a Grenadan, is assassinated by a terrorist drone. Laura volunteers to go to the pirate island to re-establish relations with the Grenadans, continue the mission, and perhaps find out which of many possible groups was responsible for the murder.

From there, she suffers invasion in Grenada, revolution in Singapore, kidnapping, shipwreck, imprisonment in Africa, abduction by Tuareg warriors, and all sorts of other indignities before returning home, a Net heroine for discovering and revealing a left-over nuclear submarine with atomic weaponry. Wouldn't you know, her husband has married her best friend in the meantime?

Laura strains credibility at times with her Candide-like innocence and her ability to be in the right place at the wrong time—about all she misses is the Lisbon earthquake—but her adventures are anything but dull, their background staggeringly conceived, and Sterling writes very well indeed.

The Psychic Bostonian

Marlborough Street
By Richard Bowker
Bantam, $3.95 (paper)

Richard Bowker's most recent (and fourth) novel, *Dover Beach*, was so good that I thought I'd bend a few unwritten rules and take a look at his third, which I missed in hardcover but which is now just out in paperback. It's called *Marlborough Street* and is equally adept, if slightly less offbeat.

The plot is simple and in less skillful hands would be downright simple-minded. The hero, Alan, is a psychic. He is used, unwillingly, by the Boston police now and then because he has had results in a few cases. Called in to see if he can get any flashes on a kidnapping case, he finds the child and one of the kidnappers, a beautiful girl whom he senses is troubled rather than evil. He falls head over heels in love and shelters her.

She is under the influence of Stone, the nasty chap who instigated the kidnapping; she leaves Alan and rejoins Stone on the west coast. Alan tracks them down, gets involved in another kidnapping which involves a particularly revolting murder, loses them again, finds *her* and they together face Stone in New York.

I.e., psychic finds girl, loses girl (several times), gets girl.

That makes it a little *too* ingen-

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uous, of course. The gimmick is that Stone is also a psychic—a paranoid, murderous psychic with a messianic complex. So the duels between the good-hearted, laid-back Alan and the vicious Stone are fought on several levels. Even so, it could be just another dopey supernatural novel, but Bowker's handling is way above and beyond that.

For one thing, the psychic powers of the two are presented as wild talents—literally. Alan never knows when his will work, and even Stone's, though more disciplined, is erratic. And furthermore, Alan has deliberately *not* explored his (he has inherited the talent fom his mother, and seen what it has done to *her* life). Only the strongest of motives will impel him to use it—such as the moral necessity of helping the police, *or* being in love.

For another, Bowker has a talent for making the unlikely believable. This applies, of course, to the plot, particularly in the matter of Alan's love for the girl. You really *believe* this guy would go through all of this for her. Obviously, Mr. Bowker has been in love (which one doubts about many writers who write about it). It also applies to a host of minor characters who are eccentric, at the least: Alan's psychic mother, who has turned herself into a caricature of a blowzy medium; his employer, a millionaire Boston recluse who writes dippy books of philosophy; the girl's mother, a failed Hollywood actress in a madhouse who has delusions of visits from John Huston. Even the various police and Western character types who pick up the hitchhiking Alan are funny *and* believable. Bowker can write, there's no doubt; I'd like to see him find subject matter as good as his abilities.

Good Nightingale, Sweet Prince

Nightingale
By Kara Dalkey
Ace, $16.95

A publisher's series (by various authors) devoted to classic fairy tales retold as contemporary fantasies is one of those propositions that has all sorts of potential for disaster. The idea of the ancient story reworked from a modern point of view has an old and honorable history, and has resulted in some great works, from O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* and Renault's *The King Must Die* to the Angela Carter-based film, *The Company of Wolves*. In inept hands, though, it becomes the worst kind of whimsy or a terrible clash between old themes and a modern smart-ass treatment.

Kara Dalkey's *Nightingale* is the third of the series, but the first I've had the courage to tackle (this is known as reader-resistance). On the strength of it, I may go back to the other two. It's no masterpiece of the subgenre, like those mentioned above, but Dalkey has taken the Hans Christian Andersen work and transmuted it into an entirely different, but very enjoyable story of her own.

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One is initially thrown by its being set in feudal Japan. How can "The Nightingale" *not* be set in China? And if you are going to reset it, some place further away, like Victorian England, would seem a better idea than just across the Sea of Japan.

Once over that hump, however, you are plunged into a story of intrigue at the Japanese court. This is during the period when the Imperial family was dominated by the mighty Fujiwara clan, who held most of the power. The current Emperor resents the domination, but seems powerless to do anything about it.

The nightingale herself is Uguisu, the daughter of a minor court official; she is beautiful but retiring, and, what's worse, in love with the Imperial gardener's son (wouldn't she be?). But her father has Ambitions, and forbids the match. In despair, she calls up her guardian spirit, the ghost of a maternal ancestor, who gives her a flute and tells her to practice.

Being an obedient girl, she follows this unhelpful advice. Eventually word comes to the Emperor about the mysterious flutist heard in the palace gardens, and after a frantic search, Uguisu is unearthed, tootling away down by the river.

The Emperor is enchanted with her; she responds to his kindness, intelligence, and sweet nature. But when she makes the mistake of calling up great-great-grandmother's spirit again, she finds that she is but a tool. Her child by the Emperor will be inhabited by the spirit of the son of great-great-etc., a powerful magician, who is out to revenge himself on the Fujiwaras and bring down the kingdom.

Uguisu naturally does not want to bear a son inhabited by the spirit of her great-great-grandfather, much less bring down the kingdom, so she rejects the Emperor. At the same time, a gift arrives from the Emperor of China; it is the most beautiful courtesan anybody's ever seen, and she can play the flute, too. (Rather repetitiously, it's true.) But *we* know it's great-great-grandmother.

Can Uguisu save the kingdom from her evil ancestors? She does, eventually, with a little help from the gardener's son, the kitchen maid, and the Goddess Amaterasu, an ancestor of the Emperor who explains succinctly just why she should let the Fujiwaras keep the power (and that, chums, is why the Japanese Royal House is still going).

Dalkey makes all this less naïve than it sounds in précis; there's a lot of natural and supernatural intrigue, and she has a nice knowledge of the Japanese culture of the time.

Check Book

Queenmagic, Kingmagic
By Ian Watson
St. Martin's, $14.95

Fantasies revolving around a game of chess have been a special, limited subgenre ever since *Through the Looking Glass* and

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what the Reverend Charles D. found there. While the setup seems ideal —a medieval milieu, individual characters, conflict—the strictures imposed are equally strong. You have to play by the rules or, like any game, it becomes pointless, and the rules of chess are few and very limiting.

One of the big problems is time. A chess game is constrained in time and moves, and it's not easy to build anything longer than a short story around a match. Ian Watson has solved this particular problem in *Queenmagic, Kingmagic* by creating a chess world in which the games can go on for years, or even generations.

The world is divided into two countries, one whose prevailing color is white, the other black. Each has a capital city and a busy population of farmers, artisans, clergy, and aristocrats. The principal citizens are those with "magic" powers; there can be up to sixteen of them. They consist of King, Queen, Princes, Bishops, Knights, and pawn-squires; they are, of course, the "pieces."

The two countries exist in an ongoing state of war, the point being to eliminate (magically) the other country's magic personnel and get the King. In the meantime, long periods can pass without a move being made or a capture effected. When the King *is* captured, legend has it, the world will end.

And it does. The story is told by the Queen's squire, Pedino, who comes into the game late—he has grown up a merchant's son and shown evidence of powers after the game has gone on for some time. He has the bad fortune to fall in love with a black squire, Sara, who has infiltrated the white city. They dream of a stalemate, though no one is sure of what would happen then; they also investigate various theories about being in magic space when the game ends. Pedino is captured, and that indeed brings about check and mate.

He and Sara escape to magic space as their world crumbles and are made off with by a huge serpent and deposited in another world. *This* one is based on the game of "snakes and ladders," and then they fall into one based on Monopoly. Eventually they come back to a chess world, and Pedino finds himself King in this new game.

It's all very clever, though Watson's rules of magic added to the more abstruse strategies of chess don't make for a system easy to figure out. And even though an infinite amount of detail is piled on, you still have the feeling you're moving in a two-dimensional world.

What GOOs Around . . .

The Lurker At the Threshold

By H. P. Lovecraft and August Derleth

Carroll & Graf, $3.50 (paper)

Look out! Here they come again. The Great Old Ones (acronym'd to GOO) and their tentacled minions are lurking at the threshold, just waiting to come down on mankind like a duck on a junebug, in the

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immortal words of Scarlett O'Hara. Not, of course, that that worthy lady ever read H. P. Lovecraft who, despite his eighteenth century mannerisms and nineteenth century prose, is firmly a writer of this century, though it's increasingly hard to believe it. This may account for his current eclipse in popularity, if not reputation; on the other hand, contemporary readers seem unable to cope with *any*body published more than a decade ago. If the frame of reference isn't immediately familiar, it may as well be in Swahili.

Be that as it may, some of us are permanently hooked on HPL's purple prose, idiosyncratic vocabulary, and outrageous mumblings, and welcome into paperback *The Lurker At the Threshold* by Himself and August Derleth. In point of fact, *Lurker* is almost entirely by Derleth, for whom the word "disciple" is a patent understatement. He just took up where HPL left off at his death, and expanded every fragment possible into a workable story. (All credit to his prescience; Lovecraft was hardly a famous or money-making proposition when he died, with only a small following of pulp magazine readers, and having seen only one of his works in book form, and that from a *very* small press indeed.)

Be *that* as it may, the current paperback edition leaves Derleth's name off the front cover, and puts it on the back as HPL *with* August Derleth.

The confirmed Lovecraft reader will note certain differences in approach. Near the end of the novel, when the GOO have nearly established a beachhead through the meddlings of the innocent protagonist, the entire Cthulhu mythos is spelled out to an underling by one of the scholarly types who are called to battle. Lovecraft scattered his overall premise through his stories in bits and pieces. And the aficionado will be startled at several references to contemporary literature—though Lovecraft read widely, one would never guess from his work that anything had been published since *The Necronomicon* in the seventh century. Derleth makes mention of *Winesburg, Ohio* and, of all things, *The Wind In the Willows*.

But the novel's atmosphere is still wonderfully sinister—of a time, still within living memory, when sections of the country, despite automobile and radio, were isolated and inbred and where strange things *could* flourish (in this case backwoods New England). It is this milieu, rather than the squamous GOO, that makes HPL's work frightening to me.

And the plot is Lovecraft's staple, which he used again and again—that of a man (never a woman—the only women in Lovecraft are witchy, senile, and cackle a lot) who returns to ancestral surroundings and begins to find a mosaic of unpleasant facts about a progenitor (letters, journals, etc.). He then manages somehow to remove the safeguards, and the GOO

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begin to ooze in, as does usually the ancestor, who has been waiting "Outside" for some innocent descendant to happen along. And things get *very* unpleasant. In other words, "the sins of the fathers" or, as they say today, what goes around, comes around.

Fantastically Funny

The Light Fantastic

By Terry Pratchett
Signet, $3.50 (paper)

The Light Fantastic by Terry Pratchett is the sequel to his *The Colour of Magic*, which was simply the funniest fantasy I had ever read—*until* the sequel came along. Now it's a tossup. I described the first book as "a laugh riot, with everything from the subtlest word plays to sheer Laurel and Hardy slapstick." The sequel continues the adventures of the inept wizard, Rincewind. (The inept wizard bit is about the only thing close to cliché in either novel.) It all takes place on a world which is a disc on the back of four elephants which stand on the back of the great turtle A'Tuin, who swims through the universe. The geography of the discworld is complicated; the major directions are Hubward and Rimward, but there are two minor directions—Turnwise and Widdershins. Rincewind is accompanied by the tourist Twoflowers, who is from the Counterweight Continent on the other side of the disc, to whom he is acting as guide; another companion is the Luggage, a piece of magic baggage with a mind of its own.

The first book ended and the second begins with Twoflowers having been tossed over the edge of the Disc in a sort of "neolithic spaceship" by some astronomer-priests determined to find out the sex of A'Tuin ("which proves," as Pratchett points out, "that there *is* such a thing as a free launch"). Rincewind is in free fall after him in what on the Disc passes for a spacesuit: "a diving bell designed by men who have never seen the sea."

As you can see, Pratchett is compulsively quotable. Every page has its laugh, and they are the kind of laughs that you absolutely *must* read to anyone unlucky enough to be in voice range. Just in the first few pages, aside from the above, there are any number of daft situations. There is the explosion in the cellar of Unseen University, caused by the magic overload of a forbidden book even more awful than the Necrotelicomnicon (see above, HPL review). This brings forth some stray demons ("even the pretty ones looked like the offspring of an octopus and a bicycle") who, of course, want to invade ("*things* from undesirable universes are always seeking an entrance into this one, which is . . . handy for the busses and closer to the shops"—see above, HPL review).

It also brings forth a fireball that rises through the building, turning the books into pineapple custard and evoking an orangutan that

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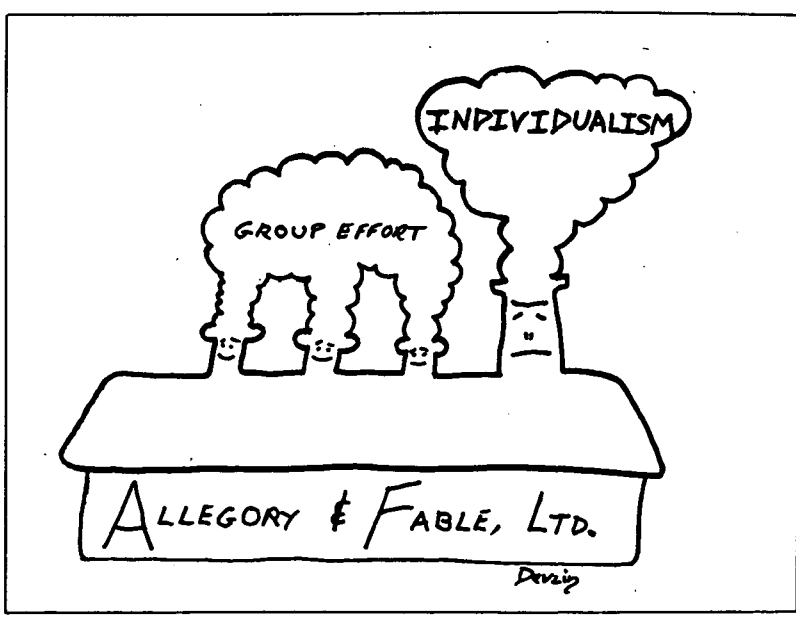
bears a suspicious resemblance to the librarian (he continues to function in a slapdash way). When the fireball goes through the kitchen, no one knows what the stove turned into, because it made good its escape before anybody saw it.

This is only the first few pages—it gets funnier. If I had my druthers, I'd have spent this entire column quoting Pratchett at you. But that would spoil the fun, so all I can say is—if you've ever taken my word for anything, take it now. Fantasy finally has a comic genius.

(So far as I can determine, *The Colour of Magic*, the first book, is out of print, of course. I suggest indignant letters to the publisher.)

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Monsters: Isaac Asimov's Wonderful Worlds of Science Fiction #8,* edited by Isaac Asimov, Martin H. Greenberg, and Charles G. Waugh (NAL, $3.95, paper); *Norby Through Time and Space* by Janet and Isaac Asimov (Ace, $2.95, paper); *Dogtales,* edited by Jack Dann and Gardner Dozois (Ace, $3.50, paper); *Films of Science Fiction and Fantasy* by Baird Searles (Harry N. Abrams, $39.95).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, Suite 133, 380 Bleecker St., New York, N.Y. 10014●



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

So many October con(vention)s, I've left out WorldCons this time. They'll be back next issue. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 823-3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's often a good time to phone cons (many phones are homes). When writing cons, enclose an SASE. Look for me at cons with a Filthy Pierre badge.

OCTOBER, 1988

7–9—**ArmadilloCon.** *For info, write:* **Box 9612, Austin TX 78766.** *Or call:* **(512) 443-3491 or 448-3630** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Austin TX (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Wyndham South. Guests will include: Jeter, Brad Foster, Shiner, Sterling, Waldrop.

7–9—**CymruCon, % McCarthy, 29 Claude Rd., Cardiff, Wales. 593-590.** Butlin Holiday Camp, Barry Is.

7–9—**NonCon. (403) 286-8128.** Palliser Hotel, Calgary AB. F. M. and Elinor Busby, Janis Svilpis.

7–9—**RoVaCon. (703) 389-9400.** Civic Center, Roanoke VA. May, Freas, Clement, Pohl, Wold, R. Pini.

7–9—**BoucherCon. (619) 294-9497.** Grant Hotel, San Diego CA. World mystery-fan's con. C. MacLeod.

7–9—**TusCon. (602) 881-3709.** Executive Inn, Tucson AZ. Stephen R. Donaldson, Ed Bryant.

7–9—**PulsarCon, % Nuhiu, Leninova 8, 91000 Skopje, Yugoslavia.** Lundwall, Kordej, Raos, Leskovsek.

7–9—**ConChord.** Airport Hilton, Los Angeles CA. The big Western SF folksinging con, now every year.

13–16—**CosmoCon, % SF/Futurology Club 2001, 20 Vapzarov St., Plovdiv 4000, Bulgaria. (32) 225778.**

14–16—**ConTact. (812) 422-4407 (days) or 479-7022 (eves.).** Ramada Inn Spa, Evansville IN. Breuer.

14–16—**PineKone. (613) 596-0815 or 728-4166.** Holiday Inn Market Sq., Ottawa ON. Barry Longyear.

14–16—**ConClave.** Hilton, Southfield MI. G. R. Dickson, artist T. C. Hamilton, fan T. J. Burnside.

21–23—**ConStellation, Box 4857, Huntsville AL 35815. (205) 772-3587.** Varley, Budrys, T. Hamilton.

21–23—**MileHiCon, Box 27074, Denver CO 80227. (303) 936-4092 or 457-8368.** Chalker, Hawke, Willis.

21–23—**NecronomiCon, Box 2076, Riverview FL 33569. (813) 677-6347 or 973-0038.** A.D. Foster.

21–23—**NotJustAnotherCon, SCUM, RSO 104, U. Mass., Amherst MA 01003. (413) 545-1924.** Delany.

21–23—**SoonerCon, Box 1701, Bethany OK 73008. (405) 942-0658.** "Women in SF." Butler, M. Murdock.

21–23—**ShoestringCon, % Student's Onion, Htfld. Poly. Box 109, College Ln., Hatfield AL10 9AB UK.**

21–24—**ConVerge, Box 4188, Wanganui NZ.** "The Gathering." Avenue Motor Inn. D. Gerrold, I. McLean.

28–30—**World Fantasy Con, Box 31815, Seattle WA 98103.** London UK. Fantasy's WorldCon. J. Herbert.

28–30—**Ohio Valley Filk Fest, Box 211101, Upper Arlington OH 43221. (614) 451-3154.** Columbus OH.

28–30—**ConCert, % J. Goldie, 97 Harrison Rd., Edinburgh EH11 1LT, UK.** *Grosvenor Hotel. Ed Bishop.*

28–30—**Fantasy Faire, 1855 W. Main, Alhambra CA 91801. (818) 337-7947.** Pasadena CA. Crawford con.

29–31—**NiCon, % SF/Fantasy Soc., SU Bldg., Queens U., Belfast BT9 1PE, UK.** At Student Union.

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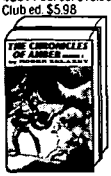

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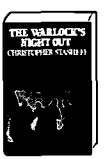

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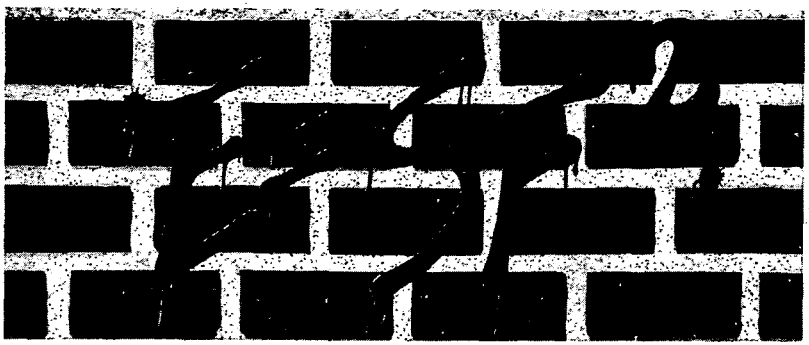

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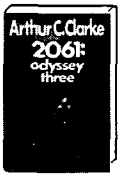

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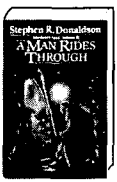

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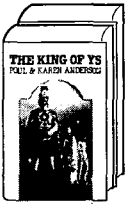

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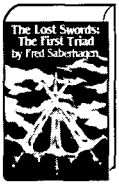

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